

**non mos, non ius<sup>1</sup>**

**Linde Van den Eede – 6GRLA**

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<sup>1</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 3.28.2.

## **Abstract**

Various causes have been ascribed to the fall of the Roman Republic. In this essay, the entitlement to honor or *dignitas* is reconsidered in light of Girard's mimetic theory. As I will prove, this ideal both stabilized and threatened society. Rather than providing a stable basis for society, *dignitas* brought the Republic on the brink of a crisis – often expressed through a crippling civil war – again and again, something only resolved by scapegoat mechanisms.

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## **Preface**

I want to thank Tate and Casey for providing me access to academic databases. I am also indebted to Jocelin for her suggestions. Last but not least, Mr. Buys for introducing me to René Girard's work and the many helpful suggestions.

All dates are BCE unless mentioned otherwise.

## Introduction

When Cicero spoke to the College of Pontiffs, he was doing so for a political reason. During his exile, his nemesis Clodius Pulcher had – amongst other things – destroyed his house and built a temple to Libertas on the spot. As much as the case had been religious, it was also deeply political: a rivalry between two men, and one that actually had started after Cicero testified during the *Bona Dea* trial, yet another trial that had been both political and religious in nature. For us, the distinction between church and state is an evident one; for the Romans, religion and politics were inseparable. In this essay, I will reconsider the delicate, socio-religious framework of Roman life, and link it with the fall of the Republic, employing Girard's mimetic theory.

This could not have been written without the work of Carlin A. Barton. 'Roman Honor' proved to be key to understanding the Roman concept of *virtus*. Equally, Barton's 2003 essay on the sacrificial system of ancient Rome proved to be engaging food for thought. Girard himself applies his mimetic theory to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, but never dabbles into the domain of Roman history itself. Liebeschuetz and Dowden among others describe sacrifice in the larger system of Roman religion, but do not consider its historical ramifications. There is of course also the great companion by Beard, North and Price, as well as Blackwell's 'Companion to Roman Religion', but this too remains a survey of the field.

It quickly becomes evident that the intersection of Roman religion, Roman emotional life and the fall of the Republic is a niche that has not often been considered by scholars. A pity, because the study of Roman religion in the late Republic can tell us something about the enormous societal changes of the era. Much of the conflicts in the last decades of the Republic revolved around religion and *dignitas*. As Beard *et al.* point out: "[...] The revolution of the late Republic was as

much intellectual as it was political, as much a revolution of the mind as of the sword; and religion was part of that revolution of the mind.”<sup>2</sup>

The structure of this paper is as follows: in a first part I will consider the key concepts of honor and religion in the first century BCE, and demonstrate that Girard’s mimetic theory shows their significance in the maintenance and downfall of the Roman Republic. Finally, I will consider political assassinations and the sacrificial language employed in their narration.

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<sup>2</sup> Beard 1998: 119.

## ***Societal Stability in the Roman Republic***

With the end of the third Punic war in 146, Rome had changed the face of the Mediterranean forever. There was but one military superpower: Rome, and its inhabitants prided themselves on their religious piety, which they believed to be the cause of their military success. They were not the only ones. The Greek author Dionysius of Halicarnassus would repeat the same sentiment in his 'Roman Antiquities':

I think it incumbent on me to relate how many and how great affairs fall under its jurisdiction, to the end that those who are unacquainted with the piety practiced by the Romans of those times may not be surprised to find that all their wars had the most successful outcome; for it will appear that the origins and motives of them all were most holy, and for this reason especially the gods were propitious to them in the dangers that attended them.<sup>3</sup>

The foundation on which Roman *pietas* was built, was not dogma, but the maintenance of the *pax deorum*: a delicate harmony between the gods and the Roman people. In the balance lay the welfare of the Republic and her citizens.<sup>4</sup> It was believed that if this balance was disturbed, the *ira deorum* was invoked, and the community was threatened. The maintenance of the *pax deorum* is what constituted Roman religion, which is the whole of (sacrificial) rituals and prohibitions necessary to maintain the *pax deorum*.

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<sup>3</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus. *Roman Antiquities, Volume I: Books 1-2*. Translated by E. Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939): 2.72.3. ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι μοι πόσων καὶ πηλίκων ἐστὶ πραγμάτων κύριον διελθεῖν, ἵνα τοῖς ἀγνοοῦσι τὴν Ῥωμαίων εὐσέβειαν, ἣν οἱ τότε ἄνδρες ἐπετήδευον, μὴ παράδοξον εἶναι φανῆ τὸ πάντας αὐτοῖς τὸ κάλλιστον λαβεῖν τοὺς πολέμους τέλος. ἀπάντων γὰρ αὐτῶν τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ὑποθέσεις εὐσεβεστάτας φανήσονται ποιησάμενοι καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μάλιστα τοὺς θεοὺς ἐσχηκότες ἐν τοῖς κινδύνοις εὐμενεῖς.

<sup>4</sup> Orlin 2007: 58.

René Girard defines ritual as an imitation of the conditions in which the murder of an original scapegoat took place. For the ancients, these conditions of the foundational murder had to be met, or the ritual lost its effectivity, leading to adverse effects for the community. Taking in account this belief, it can easily explain the Roman reverence for *orthopraxis*, the correct execution of ritual. If *vitium*, a deviation from prescribed convention occurred, the ritual had to be performed once again. If this was not done, the *ira deorum* would be invoked, and great danger would befall the community.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, there were no individual concerns at stake. It was about the stability within a whole community. It should be evident then that Roman religion was an institutionalized phenomenon, in which the *populus* as a whole played a part, as Belayche points out:

(1) individuals felt concerned in it as members of the *res publica*; (2) the rituals performed related to the group, and violations that occurred had consequences for the group. The *populus Romanus quiritium* played its part as a ritual actor either as a whole, the state, through ownership of public responsibilities, or through its various components.<sup>6</sup>

When one follows the Girardian train of thought, the *pax deorum* is nothing more than a veil for the scapegoat mechanism, the mechanism that ensured the social stability of the community, in this case the Roman Republic. This stability is one based on the sacrifice of a scapegoat – the foundational myth of the Romans is after all the old story of Romulus who killed Remus, of which the poet Horace claimed that it was the source of all the misery endured in civil war.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Orlin 2007: 58-59.

<sup>6</sup> Belayche, 2007: 276.

<sup>7</sup> Hor. *Epod.* 7. : “*sic est: acerba fata Romanos agunt / scelusque fraternae necis, / ut inmerentis fluxit in terram Remi / sacer nepotibus cruor.*”

As the responsibility of Roman religion was the maintenance of the *pax deorum* it should come as no surprise that in the tumultuous politics of the late Republic, where social stability was minimal, religion stood in the limelight. Nevertheless, Academia has suggested in the past that the decay (read: exploitation) of Roman religion ran concurrent with the decay of the Republic.

Both Liebeschuetz and Orlin consider the idea of religion being exploited a mistake. The latter sees the central place religion took during the Republic's decline as a sign of its vitality.<sup>8</sup> This vitality we should interpret as a reaction against the disintegration of the Republic's social cohesion, embodied in the *pax deorum*. It is why figures such as Cato the Younger – the symbol of a return to the *mos maiorum* – gained such acclaim among his peers or why the trend of antiquarianism exemplified by Marcus Terentius Varro<sup>9</sup> surfaced at this particular moment in history. It also clarifies why both Cicero and Caesar – who Suetonius famously described as “No regard for religion ever turned him from any undertaking, or even delayed him.”<sup>10</sup> – both favored to uphold tradition, although they considered most aspects of religion bogus.<sup>11</sup>

It should be clear then that this newly resurfaced traditionalism is a response against the *ira deorum*, against the disintegration of order. One might consider the devastating Punic wars, in which Rome was on the brink of crisis. Despite the inflicted trauma, however, the wars against Carthage were not seen as a sign of the *ira deorum*. Surprising, but not in light of mimetic theory. In peacetime, the lack of an external enemy comes inevitably with the threat of an internal conflict:

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<sup>8</sup> Liebeschuetz, 1979: 29. and Orlin 2007: 65.

<sup>9</sup> Liebeschuetz 1979: 31.

<sup>10</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 59.1. [Trans. J.C. Rolfe, 1914]: *ne religione quidem ulla a quoquam incepto absterritus umquam vel retardatus est.*

<sup>11</sup> Liebeschuetz 1979: 31.

the mimetic crisis. Its destructive effects help to explain why according to Peter Herz the ancients had the unpleasant feeling that

they lived in a final time and were close to a catastrophic end of the whole world [...] For there existed also a widespread conviction that after such a catastrophe there would be a new beginning for mankind, one could say a second chance. The guarantee of the new beginning was usually identical with the appearance of a divine being or at least of a human being who had been sent by the gods. [...] The Romans themselves expected especially the appearance of a man who would bring the nearly endless succession of civil wars and political upheavals to a fortunate and final end.<sup>12</sup>

Seen from posterity, Octavian would fulfill that Roman ‘messianic’ expectation. The new beginning also hints at the circular nature of a scapegoat mechanism: after a mimetic crisis, there is always an opportunity to start over, a moment where the community is at peace again. For men such as Sallustius and Livius, who had lived through the tumult of civil war, this external scapegoat was imperative to maintain the social cohesion of the *Res Publica*.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, for Sallustius, the destruction of Carthage was the immediate cause of the Republic’s decline:

For before the destruction of Carthage the people and Senate of Rome together governed the Republic peacefully and with moderation. There was no strife

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<sup>12</sup> Herz 2007: 306.

<sup>13</sup> Liebeschuetz 1979: 6.

among the citizens either for glory or for power; fear of the enemy preserved the good morals of the state.<sup>14</sup>

Sallustius' *metus hostilis*<sup>15</sup> can be compared to Catullus' *otium*<sup>16</sup>, famously referred to as that what destroys *reges et beatas urbes*.<sup>17</sup> It should be abundantly clear by now that the idea of the *pax deorum* was a veil for the scapegoat mechanism, a system that could only thrive when there was an external enemy. The concept of *pax deorum*, the veiled scapegoat mechanism, had an immediate effect on Roman politics, and logically on the fall of the Republic too. As shall become evident, the religious principle of the *pax deorum* deeply resonated with the politics of the era.

If one is to take into account the mimetic tendencies of the *pax deorum* in the greater scheme of Roman history, the concepts of *dignitas* and *virtus* immediately come to mind. The mimetic tendencies detected in the *pax deorum* run parallel to the structure of *dignitas* (worthiness of honor) and *virtus* (honor itself). *Dignitas* was a socially mediated concept. In the *sanctus senatus*, peace could only be guaranteed by the idealization of *virtus*. The greater the *dignitas*, the more a senator was entitled to *virtus*. This ideal of Roman warrior culture was no mere gimmick, but a cornerstone that kept society in check. For Lendon, the main function of *virtus* (honor) was to “[...] conceal sterner realities. It was a fanciful and grandiose icing on a predictably bitter cake. Honor acts as a cloak or lubricant to other forms of power. Honor was useful as a rhetoric of concealment.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 41.2 [Trans. J.C Rolfe, 2013]: *Nam ante Carthaginem deletam populus et senatus Romanus placide modesteque inter se rem publicam tractabant, neque gloriae neque dominationis certamen inter civis erat: metus hostilis in bonis artibus civitatem retinebat.*

<sup>15</sup> Fear of the enemy

<sup>16</sup> Leisure, idleness

<sup>17</sup> Catull. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Lendon 1997: 24.

*Virtus* served as a cure for the existential horror the Romans faced, because for them the truth of being was expressed in action. Only in action they could define themselves as a *vir*.<sup>19</sup> Suicide or voluntary death should be seen in the same light: death, however paradoxically it might sound, gave birth.<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, *virtus* is the affirmation of a so-called “fullness of one’s being”<sup>21</sup> over against others, against rivals. It is the result of a largely unacknowledged mimetic process. As such, *virtus* relies on a victimary mechanism: it always exists at the expense of vanquished rivals. Being the result of a mimetic process, *virtus* is also always temporary. Sooner or later, the *virtus* of one individual evokes the (envious) desires of others to supersede that *virtus*, which might result in a mimetic crisis that is ultimately resolved by sacrificial means (again). The vanquished are presented as people who had to disappear, not just as people whose fate could have been otherwise. Hence *virtus*, as the (in reality arbitrary) result of a mimetic crisis, contains a scapegoat mechanism, imperative for the internal peace.

After all, the Romans had no peacekeeping force<sup>22</sup>: the internal peace, the *pax deorum*, or as Barton phrased it, “the suppression of the vendetta” depended primarily on honor.<sup>23</sup> In the Roman mind, the threat of disgrace always loomed on the horizon. This Orwellian dynamic of Roman society ensured that no peacekeeping force was necessary: the fear of dishonor – essentially a scapegoat mechanism, because of the arbitrariness of what was considered honorable – did its job with astounding efficiency.

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<sup>19</sup> Barton 2001: 31.

<sup>20</sup> Barton 2001: 43.

<sup>21</sup> Barton 2001: 62.

<sup>22</sup> Nippel 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Barton 2001: 18.

Honor was the barrier that prevented the destroying effects of an unchecked mimetic crisis. But honor was never permanently granted. The “fullness of one’s being”<sup>24</sup> was only temporary, for paradoxically, honor could transform into the dynamic it tried to oppose: an unchecked mimetic crisis. Success (i.e. an increase in honor) could potentially invoke envy (a form of mimetic desire) and especially the concept of *dignitas* played a crucial role in this. For Cicero, *dignitas poscit*, worthiness demanded.<sup>25</sup>

Worthiness soon devolved into entitlement, and the Romans themselves realized this too. It is why Livius and Sallustius, those aforementioned victims of civil war’s tumult, saw the internal enemy as a greater threat than the hostile nation on the exterior. In Roman culture, the hostile nation, the external enemy was never demonized, but rather “the rogue male, the rex, the tyrant [who] was the one consistently demonized character [...]”<sup>26</sup> Livius’ Marcus Manlius Capitolinus, the Roman hero, is at the same time also Marcus Manlius the traitor; just as Caesar’s nature is one that is distinctly ambiguous: both a great conqueror but also a tyrant. Men like Caesar and Pompeius who made the empire great were also the men who killed it; it was their gamble that threatened to plunge Rome into a mimetic crisis for the sake of their entitlement to honor.

In the mimetic system of reciprocities, disease and cure are one and the same. *Virtus* enforced the peace within the Senate, but once the likes of a Sulla or Caesar crossed the sacred *pomerium* – ignoring what Girard terms as a prohibition to prevent mimetic desire – the tone was set for a destructive cycle of revenge: civil war. The end of the Republic was not brought on by the urban poor or the overextension of the *imperium* alone, but primarily by the *nobiles* who were caught in a deadly spiral of mimetic desire that only a scapegoat mechanism could alleviate. The political

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<sup>24</sup> Barton 2001: 62.

<sup>25</sup> Cicero, *Pro Quinctio* 7.

<sup>26</sup> Barton 2001: 101.

crisis of the Late Republic ought to be seen as a mimetic crisis first and foremost, and its impact was immensely destructive.

The impact of this all is betrayed by Cicero's invectives: a telling portrait of the era's mentality, however much they might or might not have done justice to the character of Marcus Antonius.

What he accuses Antonius of is telling:

We have men ready to use their veto, to defend the Republic by invoking a religious prohibition: we should be free from fear. He [Marcus Antonius] says, 'What are vetoes to me? What is a religious prohibition?' They are what the health of the Republic rests on. 'I disregard them and consider them far too antiquated and idiotic. [...]'<sup>27</sup>

In Cicero's eyes, the ancient prohibitions no longer mattered to Antonius. As mentioned before, Cicero considered most aspects of religion to be nonsensical, but his clinging to traditionalism, and in particular to those religious vetoes and ancient prohibitions are easily explained by the relative stability the scapegoat mechanism offered.

The ramifications of the scapegoating behind the *pax deorum* and the distinct mimetic tendencies of the *virtus/dignitas* balance had a deep impact on how the Romans handled their crises the way they did. When Tiberius Gracchus introduced agrarian reforms, the Senate responded with the *Senatus Consultum Ultimum*, a martial law that permitted everything in order to stop the crisis. The *SCU* permitted the consul to do whatever had to be done in order to protect the Republic: it

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<sup>27</sup> Cic. *Phil.* 1.10.25. [Trans. S. McElduff, 2011]: *paratos habemus qui intercedant; paratos qui rem publicam religione defendant: vacui metu esse debemus. 'quas tu mihi' inquit 'intercessiones, quas religiones?' eas scilicet quibus rei publicae salus continetur. 'neglegimus ista et nimis antiqua ac stulta ducimus:[...]*'

granted him with supreme power for a brief moment, and sanctioned the violence to follow. Initially, Scaevola refused to take action, after which Scipio Nascia, the *Pontifex Maximus*, rallied his fellow senators to kill Tiberius Gracchus. While doing so, Scipio covered his head with his toga.<sup>28</sup> This gesture was also made by priests during sacrifices<sup>29</sup>, and, as mentioned before, Scipio Nascia was the supreme pontiff. For Barton the gesture is one of consecration.<sup>30</sup> The ritualistic language used in describing the death of Tiberius Gracchus implies sacrifice, and consequently also scapegoating.

Several decades later, in 63 BCE, Cicero denounced Lucius Catilina as an enemy of the state and pressured the Senate to pass the *SCU*. Catilina eventually fell in battle and his allies in Rome were ritually executed in the Tullianum. Surrounding the circumstances of the Catilinarian conspiracy there is a peculiar trial in which Cicero defended a certain Gaius Rabirius. In 100, many years earlier, Rabirius had been involved in the death of Lucius Appuleius Saturninus, yet another rebellious Tribune of the Plebs, whose death had been sanctioned by the *SCU*. Rabirius was charged with *perduellio*, an obsolete and archaic charge. The judges were Gaius Caesar and his cousin, Lucius Caesar, who declared him guilty. The trial was subsequently ended when Quintus Metellus Celer instigated yet another archaic procedure. The goal of this rather strange episode seems to have been a warning directed at Cicero: that the *SCU* was not waterproof. And Cicero would learn that lesson the hard way several years later, when Clodius Pulcher passed a bill exiling him for the unlawful killing of Roman citizens without trial.

The prosecution of Gaius Rabirius and the Clodian laws against Cicero reveal the scapegoat mechanism behind the deaths of Saturninus (pelted to death in the curia – a temple) and Catilina,

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<sup>28</sup> Plut. , *Ti. Gracch.* 19.4. and App. *B Civ.* 1.16.

<sup>29</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 10.

<sup>30</sup> Barton 2003: 341-60.

denounced by Cicero. In the years to follow, the *SCU* no longer worked: it was a scapegoat mechanism reduced to an empty name. Rather than alleviating a crisis, it proved to be part of the problem.<sup>31</sup>

Evidently, during the last decades of the Roman Republic, the effectivity of the honor ideal had changed. Despite attempts—such as the concept of the *SCU*—to stop or delay the impending crisis, the Romans found themselves faced with an abyss of uncertainty. Eliminating a single internal enemy brought no solace to the crisis, but instead worsened it. The only response to violence, was more violence – both uncontrolled. It is why passing the *SCU* against Caesar did not help in preventing civil war. What had once been the cure to a crisis, helped precipitate that crisis further. Once again, disease and cure proved to be the same.

Caesar placed his *dignitas* above the *pomerium*. Frank Sirianni highlights this *dignitas* as the ultimate motive after the affronts caused by Pompeius and the Senate.<sup>32</sup> Stanton nuances and reconsiders the mention in Suet. *Iul.* 30.4 (*hoc voluerunt*) as an indication that Caesar had to choose between exile and civil war.<sup>33</sup> Simply put: according to the societal expectations of Roman honor, Caesar had to choose between civil war or exile. And arguably, exile would have been a worse fate than death, as it would mean the permanent loss of *virtus*, of the fullness of his being.

In the conclusion of his essay, Stanton refers to the infamous consulship of ‘Julius and Caesar’ in 59: “He had no remedy for the predicament he had created by his use of violence when consul in 59 apart from the further use of violence.”<sup>34</sup> The response to violence could only be violence: the

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<sup>31</sup> Barton 2001: 105-106.

<sup>32</sup> Sirianni 1979.

<sup>33</sup> Stanton 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Stanton 2003: 84.

*Senatus Consultum Ultimum* was the response to Caesar rejecting the orders of the Senate. Caesar responded in kind by crossing the borders of his province and marching on Rome.

By way of Girardian twist, all distinctions disappear in the civil war. Or, as Lucan would put it, *cognatasque acies*.<sup>35</sup> Kinsmen fought each other: the harmony within the community was broken and the *ira deorum* invoked. Especially in Lucan's epic on the civil war, the disappearance of distinctions becomes evident: *in bellum fugitur*<sup>36</sup>, Lucan writes as he describes how the population of Rome flees to war. Eventually, the war came to an end. Many of the senators had sided with Pompeius and had received clemency from Caesar, but by doing so, Caesar made fatal mistakes. Instead of reuniting the community with proscriptions as Sulla did, he took the *dignitas* of the people. Since Caesar let them live, they owed Caesar, rather than dying a virtuous death. Equally, elections no longer were an opportunity for more honor, but became a sham as Caesar designated the victors beforehand. Politics had become a farce. Its farcical nature became clear in the events following the death of the consul Q. Fabius Maximus at the end of 45. Fabius Maximus had died exactly on the last day of the year and Caesar quickly arranged for a consul suffect: Caninius Rebilus.

It is Cicero who sarcastically mentions that:

So in the Consulship of Caninius you may take it that nobody had breakfast!

However, at any rate no crime was committed during the same period—the

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<sup>35</sup> Luc. *BCiv.* 1.1. For a reading of Lucan as a political ironist and the paradoxes present in his work, see Bartsch, S. *Ideology in Cold Blood: a Reading of Lucan's Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Luc. *BCiv.* 1.504.

Consul's vigilance was extraordinary. Throughout his entire term of office he never closed an eye!<sup>37</sup>

And yet, according to the demands of honor, they now owed Caesar, who had transgressed all sacred boundaries, the only man who could appeal to *dignitas*. Whatever their personal justifications were for killing Caesar, there is one unifying factor in their claims. They wanted the *Res Publica* back. Or, to be more precise, they did not wish the Republic as an institution back, but the chance to obtain more *dignitas*.<sup>38</sup>

No longer were political offices the object of mimetic desire, because no more *dignitas* could be gained. It was only Caesar's position that could grant them *dignitas*: a deadly cocktail that could only lead to more violence. The crisis culminated into the act of murder, and Caesar became a scapegoat himself. That the assassination of Caesar took on the sacrificial aspects typical of the Girardian scapegoat is without question. As Dowden says: "Without butchery, there could be no piety."<sup>39</sup>

Instead of the animal slaughtered for the divination preceding the fatal Senate meeting<sup>40</sup>, it was Caesar who became the victim of sacrifice. In a way vaguely reminiscent of Scipio Nasica's gesture when he exhorted his fellow senators to defend the Republic, Caesar too, covered his head with his toga.<sup>41</sup> Here, it was not the *Pontifex Maximus* who led the butchery, but instead fell victim to it. In the last months of his life, Caesar took on the qualities of the Girardian sacrificial king, being an outcast – back in Rome after years of war, unique in his kind, but also the inevitable force

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<sup>37</sup> Cic. *Ad fam.* 7.30. [Trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, 2001]: *ita Caninio consule scito neminem prandisse. nihil tamen eo consule mali factum est; fuit enim mirifica vigilantia, qui suo toto consulatu somnum non viderit.*

<sup>38</sup> Tatum 2008: 145-166.

<sup>39</sup> Dowden 1992: 1.

<sup>40</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 81.4.

<sup>41</sup> Suet. *Iul.* 82.1., Plut. *Brut.* 17.6., *Caes.* 66.12. and App. *B Civ.* 2.117.

that dominated the 40's BCE. Several of the ancient sources liken him to the former kings of Rome, both in behavior and honors voted. Suetonius, but also others, emphasize the kingly aura that surrounded him – and in doing so, they also sanction the scapegoating, his assassination.

The setting too couldn't have been better: Caesar fell in the Senate-house: a sacred place.<sup>42</sup> Several months after the assassination, Cicero wistfully wrote to Trebonius that he wished he had been present: *quam vellem ad illas pulcherrimas epulas me Idibus Martiis invitasses!*<sup>43</sup> Cicero's banquet – *epulas* – gets another connotation when one considers John Scheid:

The study of known rituals (which is generally concerned with public rites), ritual vocabulary, and those comments gleaned from ancient sources show that Roman sacrifice was, to ancient eyes, first and foremost, a banquet.<sup>44</sup>

The main course of Cicero's banquet just happened to be Caesar. Perhaps, and this is mere speculation, the idea of a banquet as sacrificial is connected to the Roman ritual of libation. Cicero's description is not the only one employing sacrificial vocabulary. For Barry Strauss the vocabulary of Florus and Plutarch is also sacrificial.<sup>45</sup> Both Caesar's contemporary Cicero and posterity implicated a sacrificial dynamic, which is further suggested by the parallels between Caesar's death and the one of Tiberius Gracchus.

Caesar here becomes both victim and priest: the distinction between both has vanished. It is not the only vanishing distinction. During the killing itself, the distinction between *liberator* and

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<sup>42</sup> App. *B Civ.* 4.8.

<sup>43</sup> Cic. *Fam.* 10.28. "How I wish you invited me to that most glorious banquet on the Ides of March!"

<sup>44</sup> Scheid 2007: 270.

<sup>45</sup> Strauss 2015: 135.

*dictator* disappeared: several assassins ended up wounding each other<sup>46</sup> and someone injured Marcus Brutus' hand.<sup>47</sup>

The mimetic rivalry of the assassins had reached its climax, then culminated into unifying violence against Caesar. According to legend, his last words would be “καὶ σὺ, τέκνον;”<sup>48</sup>, be it an expression of the betrayal or a curse dooming either Decimus or Marcus Brutus.

The aftermath was devastating. In the civil war that followed, Rome's elite was brought to ruin. In the end, Caesar proved to be right:

Some, too, say that he was wont to declare that it was not so much to his own interest as to that of his country that he remain alive; he had long since had his fill of power and glory; but if aught befell him, the commonwealth would have no peace, but would be plunged in strife under much worse conditions.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> App. *B Civ.* 117.

<sup>47</sup> Plut. *Brut.* 17.7.

<sup>48</sup> “You too my son?” The meaning of his last words has been the subject of much debate. Some consider it a curse, others see it as the ultimate expression of betrayal. For interesting interpretations, see James Russell, “Julius Caesar's Last Words: A Reinterpretation,” in *Vindex Humanitatis. Essays in Honour of John Huntly Bishop*, ed. Bruce Marshall (Armidale: University of New England, 1980), 123-128. and Ioannis Ziogas, “Famous Last Words: Caesar's Prophecy on the Ides of March.” *Antichthon* 50 (2016): 134–53.

<sup>49</sup> Suetonius, *Iul.* 86.1. [Trans. J.C. Rolfe, 1914]: *Quidam dicere etiam solitum ferunt: non tam sua quam rei publicae interesse, uti salvus esset; se iam pridem potentiae gloriaeque abunde adeptum; rem publicam, si quid sibi eveniret, neque quietam ore et aliquanto deteriore condicione civilia bella subituram.*

## Conclusion

The socio-religious system that tied together Roman society found its origin in scapegoat mechanisms that were bound to invert. The *virtus* ideal had once maintained the peace as a part of the larger scheme of the *pax deorum*, but eventually turned on itself. At the same time a dynamic that tries to save the Republic but that ultimately destroys it, it mirrors the basic premises of the Girardian theoretical framework. What initially proved to be an efficient way to ensure that the Republican system worked, would destroy it once Rome had become a military superpower that no longer feared an external enemy like Carthage. The sacrificial connotations emerging from assassinations in the first century BCE further imply the existence of (failing) scapegoat mechanisms that brought an end to the Roman Republic.

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