

Infamous Fame: Shaffer's Tactic in *Amadeus*

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, one of the greatest musicians in the world, enchants people across eras with his fabulous music. Peter Shaffer, in *Amadeus* (2001), depicts the mysterious life and death of this musician in a very different way. Instead of presenting an intelligent and refined artist, Shaffer, from the perspective of his rival, Antonio Salieri, gives us a “foul-mouthed, immature jackanapes” that shocks his audiences in the theatre. Lady Thatcher's displeased response after seeing the play tells the gap between Shaffer's Mozart and the Mozart image in most public's mind. However, the image of the vulgar Mozart, though a contrast to his music, lights up the uniqueness of his music at the age of Enlightenment. The paper, aims to analyze the difference in Mozart's music, and the different Mozart character Shaffer presents in his play by drawing on René Girard's notion of collective violence and scapegoat mechanism. Also, the author intends to examine the playwright's intention and exegesis as he composes this mysterious musician in such a different way.

Keywords: Mozart, René Girard, collective violence, scapegoat mechanism

Introduction

As depicting the mysterious life and death of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Shaffer presents the world a very different Mozart in his *Amadeus* (2001). Shaffer, from the perspective of his rival, Antonio Salieri, gives us a “foul-mouthed, immature jackanapes” that shocks his audiences in the theatre, including Lady Thatcher, who directly told to Peter Hall how uncomfortable audiences could be after seeing this foul-mouthed Mozart as knowing that it is the musician who left such elegant music to the world. Lady Thatcher's displeased response tells how “improper” the Mozart on Shaffer's play is. In this paper, the author intends to discuss why Shaffer, regardless of the danger of annoying the public, presents such Mozart on his stage. As exploring Shaffer different exegesis towards this musician, the author also intends to discuss how and why Shaffer's Mozart character could be so different comparing to his time. By drawing on René Girard's notion of collective violence and scapegoat mechanism, an analysis of the playwright's motivation of composing this mysterious musician in such a different way will be done in this paper.

Mozart and His Music

Mozart, because of his musical talent, was paraded around the continent by his father, Leopold Mozart, who made him play the keyboard blindfolded or with one finger (Shaffer, 2001), which wins Mozart's applause and fame since his childhood. Nevertheless, Mozart's extreme talent and fame is not always a good thing in his career,

especially his musical one at the court.

Owing extreme talent could be a hint to Mozart's later destruction. Girard (1986) in *The Scapegoat* tells us that extreme characteristics are never good things, for they "ultimately attract collective destruction at some time or other". The "extremes" Girard mentions, are "not just of wealth or poverty, but also of success and failure, beauty and ugliness, vice and virtue, the ability to please and to displease" (p. 19). Girard's statement accidentally echoes what Mozart encounters at the court of Emperor Joseph II.

By the time of Mozart's arrival in Vienna, the court has already been alive within gossip about this musical prodigy. Rosenberg, the Director of the Imperial Opera, directly sees him as a troublemaker. As he notes: "I believe we are going to have trouble with this young man. He was a child prodigy. That always spells trouble" (Shaffer, 2001, p. 22). Mozart, in fact, brings trouble not only to the conventional court but also to himself. He makes himself as the target of attack. The purpose of his emergence initiates his days as the target of public resentment, that is, the mission to compose a comic opera in German, which is not warmly accepted by the nobles at the court.

STRACK (*To* ROSENBERG) You are required to commission a comic opera in German from Herr Mozart.

[...]

ROSENBERG (*Loftily*) Why in German? Italian is the only possible language for opera!

[...]

STRACK (*Firmly*) The idea of a national opera is dear to His Majesty's heart. He desires to hear pieces in good plain German.

VAN SWIETEN Yes, but why *comic* [italic original]? It is not the function of music to be funny. (Shaffer, 2001, pp. 21-22)

From the responses of Rosenberg, Van Swieten, and the Prefect of the Imperial Library, it is clear that only a serious Italian work is appropriate for the Viennese court. The work Mozart is commissioned to write undoubtedly breaks the operatic traditions in Vienna. As Mozart disobeys the opera convention of the court, he also challenges to the highest musical Establishment in Austria (Gianakaris, 1981, p. 40). He is unwelcome to the court authorities.

In addition, not only Mozart's coming brings trouble to the established court system, but also his music is troublesome to the conventional court at that time. Though being highly appreciated today, Mozart's music was not understood by his contemporaries. Mozart's original music "marked the dawning of a new musical freedom". "His music", as Gianakaris (1981) puts it, "was unsettling to audiences, patrons, and other musicians of the day who were accustomed to one particular set of conventions—and to conventionality" (p. 40). As Rosenberg says that Mozart puts "too much spice" and "too many notes" in his music (Shaffer, 2001, p. 22). Even the emperor shares this "too much spice and too many notes" viewpoint after watching the first performance of *The Abduction From the Seraglio*. As the emperor mentions, "There are in fact only so many notes the ear can hear in the course of an evening" (Shaffer, 2001, p. 39). Obviously, Mozart's music is very different from the musical system that those authorities are used to, and it is too complicated or too difficult for his (mediocre) contemporaries to understand or to enjoy his music.

Difference could be dangerous, especially in Mozart's case. Girard's interpretation about difference explains why Mozart's difference brings him a disaster. Girard (1986) proposes the ideas: "difference within the system" and "difference outside the system" (p. 21) in *The Scapegoat*, and uses a "human body" as the example

to explain the distinction. Girard (1986) sees the human body as “a system of anatomic differences”, where various different organs function differently inside the human body. However, if there is one disability taking place, even if it is a result of an accident, it is disturbing, because it gives the impression of a disturbing dynamism, which seems to threaten the very system (Girard, 1986, p. 21). As mentioned, Mozart's emergence brings difference, and that difference obviously disturbs the system of his time, and therefore threatens the very system of the old authority. Mozart's music is a typical example. As he mentioned, “Why are Italians so terrified by the slightest complexity in music? Show them one chromatic passage and they *faint!* [italics original]” (Shaffer, 2001, p. 43). His answer tells how his music bothers the court authorities at his time. For them, Mozart's “complexity” or “chromatic passage” in music is terrifying, because it, in terms of Girard (1986), “reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility, and its morality” (p. 21). Mozart's difference, in other words, reminds the old system of the existence of the other like him, which is unacceptable, for once such difference is acknowledged, the establishment must be turned over. Therefore, though Mozart's musical talent makes him stand out in the continent, his music, like a disturbing dynamism, menaces the very musical system of the Enlightenment.

As Huber and Zapf (1993) suggest: “nothing but the very essence of Mozart's music [...] is the ultimate reason for his conflict with the established society of the Court: the greater the works he writes, the more he writes himself out of this society” (p. 309). As his music, which cannot be appreciated by his contemporary, the musician himself cannot merge into the society, either.

Accordingly, the author believes that it could be such “difference” in Mozart's music that contributes to Shaffer's Mozart persona in *Amadeus*. The brat-Mozart character in *Amadeus* comes from Shaffer's exegesis of Mozart's music at the Age of Enlightenment, that is, being different, unique and original. Therefore, the way Shaffer depicts Mozart not only matches the plight or conflict the historical Mozart encounters in his society, but also makes him a public enemy of the court.

Being a musical prodigy has already set Mozart as an unwelcome guest; his original music also makes him an improper candidate staying at the conventional court. The way Shaffer depicts the musician further pushes Mozart to the hell where he could never find an exit out. It is the historical time Mozart belongs to that enhances his disaster. As mentioned, Mozart lives at the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, the tenant of which, as Gianakaris (1981) writes, “included supreme faith in rational man and in the universally valid principles that governed humanity, nature and society” (p. 40). However, the sudden giggling and vulgarity of Shaffer's Mozart demonstrate his infantile personality and arbitrary lifestyle, all of which violate the basic principles of being a “normal” or “rational” man. And it is not simply his behavior, but also his appearance that abhors his contemporaries. Mozart's gaudy coat, for instance, embellishes with scarlet ribbons, as Salieri notes, is “an even more vulgar coat than usual” that reveals his “difference” or “abnormality” in advance (Shaffer, 2001, p. 37). Mozart, therefore, becomes a menace to the foundations of Enlightenment thought (as cited in Gianakaris, 1982, p. 40). As completely disobeying the credo of his time, the Mozart persona also implies Mozart's later persecuted destiny and fate as the scapegoat—that is, Mozart needs to be sacrificed for the good of the society.

The Scapegoat

In *The Scapegoat*, Girard (1986) lists some stereotypes of the victims of persecution. As Girard notes: “They [the victims] attack the very foundation of cultural order, the family and the hierarchical differences without

which there would be no social order” (p. 15). Although Mozart did not commit any violent crimes against society, his vulgar speech, actions, and manners remain a threat to the social order of the Age of Enlightenment, and his violations of the musical conventions of his contemporaries also make him a threat to the social convention, which all indicates his being selected as the victim of sacrificed. As Girard (1986) tells: “The signs that indicate a victim’s selection result not from the difference within the system but from the difference outside the system” (p. 21). Therefore, Mozart’s difference, which is outside the system of his time, contributes his fate as the selected victim.

In addition, “In an Age of Reason”, as Gianakaris (1981) puts it, “he [Mozart] was an aberration whose potential artistic success became an offense to the grand order of the universe” (p. 40). The author believes that Shaffer, to rationalize Mozart unfortunate experience, exaggerates the musician’s abnormality. Therefore, Shaffer’s Mozart-persona is “abnormal” in taste, actions, and personality. Not only his extraordinary musical talent, but also his very personal being disturb those court authorities, which results in his being an outsider at the court. Being a threat to Viennese music generally, and to the pervasive attitudes of the Age of Reason metaphysically, “Mozart had to be deterred” (Gianakaris, 1986, p. 40). “The collective anguish and frustration” of the authorities at the court therefore finds “vicarious appeasement” in Mozart as the victim.¹ Mozart therefore is the scapegoat selected for the “crisis” he arouses to the order of the age of Enlightenment.

Metamorphosis

As Mozart is gradually perished physically and spiritually, the younger man, like those mythical scapegoats Girard mentions, is transformed to “the sacred”. As Girard (1986) notes:

It is conceivable that a victim may be responsible for public disasters, which is what happened in myths as in collective persecutions, but in myths, and only in myths, the same victim restores the order, symbolizes, and even incarnates it. (p. 42)

In *Amadeus*, we cannot see the victim restoring, symbolizing, or incarnating order, but we can see the transformation of Mozart: transforming from an obscene child with God’s gift (the musical talent) to the incarnation of the divinity within his music. Salieri, at the end of the play, finds such divinity in Mozart as Mozart is presenting him his *Requiem*. That is, Mozart, via his music, transforms himself into a sacred being that possesses the power of purgation, purifying his anguished rival, Salieri. Such divinity is especially obvious as Shaffer cooperates with director Milos Forman and adapts this play into a film work in 1984. In the film version *Amadeus*, Mozart’s *Requiem* is done by Salieri’s dictation. At the deathbed scene, Mozart, as his music, is not vulgar anymore.²

In addition, Mozart, with his *Requiem*, makes Salieri let go his inner wrath and agony; he makes the manic Salieri confess his sins to his rival, and even makes him ask for forgiveness.

SALIERI Please, Wolfgang. *Ti implore!* [*italics original*] [...] For all my sins against you. All my damages, my

¹ These terms are from Girard’s expression in the third chapter of *The Scapegoat* (1986); the original sentence is translated as follows: “Vast social groups found themselves at the mercy of terrifying plagues such as the Black Death or sometimes less visible problems. Thanks to the mechanism of persecution, collective anguish and frustration found vicarious appeasement in the victims...” (p. 39).

² See *Amadeus*, dir. by Milos Forman (Warner Bros, 1984).

trespasses unnumbered—absolve me now! For all my cruelties—my slanders and malice—my destructive wickedness and most unworthy deeds—absolve me now! (Shaffer, 2001, p. 110)

As Girard (1986) mentions: “If this victim can extend his benefits beyond death to those who have killed him, he must either be resuscitated or was not truly dead” (p. 44). Such is the case with Mozart’s music. Salieri after reading Mozart’s *Requiem* says:

SALIERI (*To audience*) What could I say? In my shaking hands I held a terrible contradiction that only Art can show. Something *immortal*—yet stinking of *death*. *Indestructible*—and yet *rotting!* [*italics original*] [...] Suddenly I was seized by an over-whelming horror!

[...]

SALIERI (*Still to audience, clutching the manuscript*) Who was this *for* [*italics original*], this appalling music? Not himself. Of course not himself! What need to mourn a man who will live *forever* [*italics original*]? (Shaffer, 2001, p. 106)

Mozart, as Salieri says, will live forever in his music, and as the persecuted victim, he has such a force that even death cannot stop him. Salieri, who has spent his life pursuing the divinity in music, finds eternity in Mozart’s compositions. As having Salieri involved in the process of composing Mozart’s *Requiem*, Shaffer presents the composer’s crazed lust of “snatch[ing] a piece of divinity for himself” (Shaffer, 1984, p. 46). The author believes that Salieri, to seize eternity, intends to get the signs of a victim from Mozart: to become a victimizing victim.

Victimizing Victim

To snatch the divinity in Mozart’s being and to seize a name for eternity, Salieri wants to be a victim, too. He wants to be a scapegoat, because the scapegoat has a certain force that even death cannot stop it, and is thus immortalized. Salieri then has one trick to get his own name remembered. Intending to inspire anger or terror in his contemporaries, Salieri gets himself accused of committing a violent crime.

SALIERI [...] All this week I have been shouting out about murder [...]. Mozart—*pieta!* Pardon your assassin! Mozart!

[...]

WHISPERERS (*Faintly*) Salieri! ...

SALIERI (*Triumphantly*) I did this deliberately! ... My servants carried the news into the street!

WHISPERERS (*Louder*) Salieri! ...

SALIERI The streets repeated it to one another!

WHISPERERS (*Louder*) Salieri! ... Salieri! ...

SALIERI Now my name is on every tongue! Vienna, City of Scandals, has a scandal worthy of it at last.

WHISPERERS *SALIERI! ... ASSASSIN! ... ASSASSIN! ... SALIERI!*

[...]

SALIERI Well, my friends, now they all know for sure! They will learn of my dreadful death—and will believe the lie forever! After today, whenever men speak of Mozart’s name with love, they will speak of mine with loathing! As his name grows in the world, so will mine—if not in fame, then in infamy. I’m going to be immortal after all—And He will be powerless to prevent that! (Shaffer, 2001, pp. 116-117)

To be remembered, Salieri has himself been accused of murdering Mozart, by which his name could be connected with Mozart’s forever, even at the price of infamy. The blending of these two composers is thus further realized in the “murder”.

However, can this trick be successful? At the end of the play the venticellos read Beethoven’s Conversation

Book and the newspaper, *The German Musical Times*, to each other:

v.1 Beethoven's Conversation Book, eighteen twenty-four. Visitors write the news for the deaf man.

v.2 (*Reading*) Salieri is quite deranged. He keeps claiming that he is guilty of Mozart's death, and made away with him by poison.

v.1 The German Musical Times, May twenty-fifth, eighteen twenty-five.

He hands newspaper to VENTICELLO 2.

v.1 (*Reading*) Our worthy Salieri just cannot die. In the frenzy of his imagination he is even said to accuse himself of complicity in Mozart's early death. A rambling of the mind believed in truth by no one but the deluded old man himself.

[...]

v.1 I don't believe it.

v.2 I don't believe it.

[...]

v.1 & v.2 (*Together*) No one believes it in the world! (Shaffer, 2001, p. 118)

Though Salieri intends to connect his name to Mozart in order to be remembered, the story Salieri tries to spread can lead to gossip or rumor. Being a murderer though causes turmoil of the social order; Salieri cannot successfully make him a selected victim, being sacrificed for the good of the society. As Girard (1986) reminds us: "the victims are chosen not for the crimes they are accused of but for the victim's signs that they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis" (p. 24). Though in Mozart's case, we can see Mozart's fate as the scapegoat results from the turmoil he brings to his society, in Mozart we can find the marks of the victim, which further convinces his persecutors his connection to the crises he causes. Certainly groups of people, as Girard suggests, tend to be marked as the victims, such as the minority, the outsider, a foreigner, or a newcomer of a group. And those signs all can be found in Mozart; for instance, Mozart's unique musical style makes him the musical minority at the court; his Salzburg roots make him a foreigner in a court dominated by Italians. He is certainly a new comer of the court. All signs indicate that Mozart is meant to be the victim.

On the contrary, Salieri does not bear signs of the victim. Though he tries to connect his name to a scandal of murder to disturb the social order, the selection of the scapegoat does not count on one scandal but the signs of the victim. Such a rumor cannot make him the scapegoat, suffering from persecution of collective violence and being sacrificed to be the sacred one. People just see him as a deluded old man, and his music is gradually forgotten with time passing. However, Salieri's wish to achieve infamy is not completely thwarted; the rumor ferments somehow. As his music is gradually forgotten, some people still connect his name to Mozart.

In addition, Conroy (1989) proposes that Shaffer recognizes in the mediocre Salieri a possible alter ego. "Like Salieri in the 1780's", Conroy mentions, "Shaffer is at the top of his profession, generously rewarded for his endeavors, applauded by critics and audiences. But has he written any work that will stand the test of time? Has he produced any real art?" (p. 35). Conroy certainly does not answer these questions, but he believes such questions inform the structure and the deepest meaning of *Amadeus*. It is Conroy's questions that remind us of what Lady Thatcher said after seeing *Amadeus*: "It was inconceivable that a man who wrote such exquisite and elegant music could be so foulmouthed" (Shaffer, 2001, p. xii).³ Although Hall told her, "Mozart's letters proved he was just that: he had an extraordinarily infantile sense of humor. In a sense, he protected himself from maturity

³ See Introduction to the play *Amadeus*, in which Sir Peter Hall records the response of the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, who after watching the play was very much displeased with its depiction of a vulgar Mozart.

by indulging his childishness” (Shaffer, 2001, p. xii). Lady Thatcher still disbelieved Hall, and replied: “I don’t think you heard what I said. He couldn’t have been like that” (Shaffer, 2001, p. xii). To further convince Lady Thatcher, Hall sent a copy of Mozart’s letters to her the next day; however, it was useless. The Prime Minister insisted that he was wrong. Lady Thatcher’s response shows how uncomfortable the audience may feel while seeing Mozart, who wrote such exquisite music, is depicted so foulmouthed. The author cannot help wondering if it is Shaffer’s aim to have history remember him by this shocking portrait of a musical immortal. If we, as Conroy suggests, see Salieri as the alter ego of the playwright, then it is very possible that Shaffer, as Salieri, intended to get such infamy to have his name fall into the margin of selected victims. Shaffer in fact successfully arouses the turmoil of being blamed for presenting such “different” Mozart to the world. However, like his Salieri, Shaffer cannot be a victim of collective violence, because he, as his Salieri, does not possess marks of persecuted victims. Nevertheless, the turmoil he creates connects his name to Mozart’s, for his creating a “very different” Mozart.

Conclusions

In the end of this paper, the author, as quoting Conroy’s article in 1989, which suggests Shaffer sees Salieri, Mozart’s rival, as his alter ego, infers that Shaffer is stepping on Salieri’s path of connecting his name with Mozart. That is, no matter what kind of reputation he might get, what he wants is merely to be remembered. As presenting the “foul-mouthed” Mozart to the world, Shaffer successfully arouses a turmoil from the annoyance of Mozart’s fans, and the turmoil he creates, though cannot contribute his eternal fame (or infame), still connects his name to Mozart, especially after the play was adapted into a movie. Everytime people watch the *Amadeus* film, watching Mozart’s childish pink wig and silly giggle, people may turn the DVD back and check whose work makes Mozart this way, and then they will see the name Peter Shaffer. Shaffer is therefore connected to *Amadeus* always.

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