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Graham Saunders

## 'Out Vile Jelly': Sarah Kane's 'Blasted' and Shakespeare's 'King Lear'

Sarah Kane's notorious 1995 debut, *Blasted*, has been widely though belatedly regarded as an innovative example of experiential or 'in-her-face theatre'. However, Graham Saunders here argues that the best playwrights not only innovate in language use and dramatic form, but also rewrite the classic plays of the past. He believes that too much stress has been placed on the play's radical structure and contemporary sensibility, with the effect of obscuring the influence of Shakespearean tradition on its genesis and content. He clarifies Kane's gradually dawning awareness of the influence of Shakespeare's *King Lear* on her work and how elements of that tragedy were rewritten in terms of dialogue, recast in thematic terms and reworked in terms of theatrical image. As a result, he sees *Blasted* as both a response to contemporary reality and an engagement with the history of drama. Graham Saunders is senior lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of the West of England, in Bristol, and author of the first full-length study of Kane's work: *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester University Press, 2002). An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the 'Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium' conference in Brussels, May 2001. Saunders is currently working on articles about Samuel Beckett and Edward Bond.

OVER THE PAST thirty years the practice of rewriting *King Lear* has occupied a number of British dramatists, producing plays such as Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971), Barrie Keefe's *King of England* (1988), Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1989) and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1991). The playwright Sarah Kane's 1995 debut, *Blasted*, is no less an example of a contemporary playwright rewriting a classic text, and she has spoken of being aware that 'when I was writing *Blasted* there was some point at which I realized that there was a connection with *King Lear*'.<sup>1</sup>

These acts of rewriting can be seen as a reaction to the heightened status *King Lear* has occupied within the Shakespearean canon over the past fifty years, much of which can be attributed to Jan Kott's 1964 book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. Writing soon after the Second World War, Kott drew attention to the close parallels that ran through Shakespearean drama and the turmoil – moral, scientific, and social – of post-war Europe. The book was immensely influential, especially on the 'new theatre' in Britain that set about reinterpreting Shakespeare's

work in the 'fifties and 'sixties.

A chief admirer of Kott's ideas was the director Peter Brook, who drew on the comparisons made by Kott between *King Lear* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, synthesizing them into his 1962 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, using the setting of a bleak, decaying landscape, reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot* as well as *Endgame*. A similar emphasis was given to the idea of a pitiless, non-redemptive universe, with Shakespeare's characters undergoing the same prolonged sufferings as Beckett's fallible and victimized creations.

### Sarah Kane's 'Blasted' and 'King Lear'

Despite retrospectively being seen as a defining moment in British theatre,<sup>2</sup> when *Blasted* was first staged at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs, it created an unprecedented barrage of negative criticism and a media controversy not seen in Britain since the prosecution in 1980 of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. While Edward Bond has compared the importance of *Blasted*,

staged in the tiny Theatre Upstairs to 'hiding the Alps under a bed', and calling Kane 'easily the most important writer to come out of the Court in at least twenty years',<sup>3</sup> many of the early reviewers took much the same position in relation to the depiction of violence in *Blasted* as did Samuel Johnson to the blinding in *King Lear*: namely that the acts of sexual and physical violence in Kane's play lacked a dramatic context and so represented 'no more than an artful chamber of horrors designed to shock and nothing more'.<sup>4</sup>

With such exceptions as Samuel Johnson and A. C. Bradley,<sup>5</sup> many critics defend the violence in *King Lear*, arguing that dramatic incidents such as Gloucester's blinding are often justifiable – in this case arising from the consequences of patriarchal neglect. While several critics of the first Royal Court production of *Blasted* drew comparisons with *King Lear*, their comments were meant to be taken sarcastically,<sup>6</sup> and indeed, beyond the obvious motif of blinding, any claim that the two plays share thematic or dramatic similarities seems at first unlikely.

Kane's play, set in a hotel room in Leeds, is an encounter between an alcoholic middle-aged journalist called Ian, who is terminally ill, and a young woman called Cate, who we learn is a former girlfriend. The purpose of bringing her to the hotel is seduction, which culminates in Ian raping Cate. The play then changes radically, abandoning the conventions of realism, dislocating the hotel room, and placing it into an undisclosed war-zone. A Soldier bursts in, Cate escapes, and with a gun pointed at his head Ian recounts the dehumanizing experiences that have befallen both himself and a former lover who was raped and murdered.

The Soldier proceeds to sodomize Ian and then blinds him by sucking out his eyes. The Soldier then commits suicide. Cate returns to the hotel room and describes the scenes of war outside. She also brings with her a baby which has been abandoned. The baby subsequently dies, she buries it under the floorboards (giving it a Christian blessing) and then leaves in order to scavenge for food. Left alone, Ian undergoes what can be described as a cataclysmic 'dark night of the

soul', which culminates in his attempting to eat the baby. Cate returns with food, which we learn she has secured through selling herself to some soldiers. The play ends with Cate feeding Ian sausage, bread, gin, and his monosyllabic, 'Thanks.'

### Alternative Divisions of the Kingdom

While *Blasted* was almost unique as a response to the war in Yugoslavia by a British playwright in the mid-'nineties,<sup>7</sup> early critics were irritated by the play's refusal to make explicit comparisons with the Bosnian conflict. While the vagueness of locale and lack of explanation concerning the actual civil war in *King Lear* has been held up as part of its sublime 'universality', in *Blasted* it was simply seen as poor writing. Sheridan Morley was perhaps the most trenchant in expressing this frustration:

The real scandal is that it is a truly terrible little play, which starts out lethargically in Leeds and ends up buggered in Bosnia without any indication that the author has thought through how to get from one location to the other, or whether she really has anything worth saying in either.<sup>8</sup>

Kane, however, has argued that the blurring of location was part of a theatrical experiment with a deliberate purpose:

I tried to draw on lots of different theatrical traditions. War is confused and illogical, therefore it is wrong to use a form that is predictable. Acts of violence simply happen in life, they don't have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible. That's how it is in the play. Critics would prefer it if there was something artificial or glamorous about violence.<sup>9</sup>

Alexander Leggatt sees much the same process operating in *King Lear*, and argues that if Shakespeare wished directly to represent warfare he could easily have done so, repeating dramatic methodologies displayed in plays such as the *Henriad* cycle or *Coriolanus*. In *King Lear* a different approach is taken, and it is 'the low, undignified essence of violence'<sup>10</sup> that constitutes the real subject of the play rather than a depiction of war itself.

In *Blasted*, our first indication of the con-

flict is Cate's matter-of-fact comment, after going to the window: 'Looks like there's a war on' (ii, 33).<sup>11</sup> The reasons for the conflict are never discussed, and indeed remarks such as Ian's 'Don't know what the sides are here' (iii, 40), all contribute to what seems like a deliberate attempt to obfuscate the origins of the conflict. Following from Leggatt's comment that it is the anatomy of violence that preoccupies Shakespeare in *King Lear*, John Russell Brown sees the play as one that deliberately relies more 'on an audience's sense-reactions than its understanding of verbal statements or argument'.<sup>12</sup> For Kane, *Blasted* was also 'experiential rather than speculative'.<sup>13</sup>

Later critical appraisals of Kane's play have acknowledged the strength of Kane's decision to dislocate the second half of the play to a nebulous war zone. Elizabeth Sakellaridou, for instance, has commented:

Instead of drawing a clear line between 'here' and the 'there' . . . by deliberately collapsing the geographical barrier between a safe English town (Leeds) and a real Bosnian battlefield she devises an effective non-realistic strategy which disarms her British audience, removing any rational argument for non-involvement.<sup>14</sup>

### Trapped in a Room

However, when Kane began writing *Blasted* in 1992 she had no grand scheme in mind either to use elements from *King Lear* or to comment on the Bosnian conflict. Her initial idea for her untitled play was based on an exploration of sexual abuse, with the central dramatic idea being a man and woman trapped together in a room, a situation which culminates in the woman's rape. In the early stages of writing, neither the conflict in Bosnia nor *King Lear* formed part of the play. Then an incident from that conflict – the siege of Srebrenica – forced Kane to reevaluate what she was doing:

I switched on the news one night while I was having a break from writing, and there was a very old woman's face in Srebrenica just weeping and looking into the camera and saying, 'Please, please, somebody help us, because we need the UN to come here and help us.' And I was sitting there

and watching it and I thought no one's going to do anything. . . . I thought this is absolutely terrible and I'm writing this ridiculous play about two people in a room. What does it matter? What's the point of carrying on? So I now knew what I wanted to write about, yet somehow this story about the man and the woman is still attracting me. So I thought, 'What could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia?' And suddenly the penny dropped and I thought, 'Of course it's obvious, one is the seed and the other is the tree.' I do think that the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization. I think the wall between so-called civilization and what happened in central Europe is very thin, and it can get torn down at any time.<sup>15</sup>

### 'Our Darker Purpose'

One of the key ideas that governs both *King Lear* and *Blasted* is the relationship established between acts of personal cruelty and the full-scale chaos and atrocities that arise out of civil war. Violence is embedded deep within the structure of *King Lear*, with events such as the blinding of Gloucester springing out of incidents that have taken place long before the beginning of the play. Key actions, such as Lear's desire to renounce and divide the kingdom, Cordelia and Kent's banishment, and Edmund's simmering resentment towards his father set off a violent chain of events which Kenneth Muir in his introduction to the play sees as 'unleashed horrors – treachery, blindness, madness, murder, suicide and war'.<sup>16</sup>

Lear's behaviour towards his daughters, and Gloucester's neglect of his bastard son Edmund are revisited on the two old men through banishment, blinding, and madness. In *Blasted*, Kane uses the motif of sexual violence, whereby Ian's rape of Cate is later revisited on him by the Soldier, who in turn uses the act of rape on Ian for a specific purpose, namely to come to terms with the rape and murder of his girlfriend Col by a group of soldiers. The tale he recounts and the literal re-enactment on Ian of her rape and blinding culminate in his suicide, as the only way of truly connecting with his murdered lover.

The strange mix of love and pity shown by the Soldier to his dead lover is tempered by the misogyny and violence in the tale of how he raped three women, sodomizing the youngest aged twelve (iii, 43). This simultaneous reverence for women – as in the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia – also takes place within a context whereby women's sexuality is portrayed as wanton, dangerous, and diseased. Shakespeare shows this through Goneril and Regan's murderous desire for Edmund, explicitly finding its poetic expression during the height of Lear's madness:

The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't  
 With a more riotous appetite. Down from the  
 waist  
 They're centaurs, though women all above.  
 But to the girdle do the gods inherit;  
 Beneath is all the fiends. There's hell, there's  
 darkness,  
 There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,  
 stench,  
 Consumption. Fie, fie, fie; pah, pah!  
 (IV, 5, 120–6)<sup>17</sup>

Derek Cohen, in his discussion of the speech, not only points out that 'the dark sulphurous pit for Lear is the vagina', but that its primary intention is to reduce all womankind 'to their sexual and reproductive function'.<sup>18</sup> Kane takes the blatant misogyny inherent in this reductive process and forces the imagery to its ultimate and logical conclusion. In the first of a series of short tableaux, punctuated by changes between light and dark, we see Ian masturbating and repeating the word 'cunt' repeatedly (v, 59). Kane explained that the image and the monosyllabic mantra were both a way of trying to dramatically express an aspect of Ian's personality:

I was talking with a bloke who's a really close friend, and we were talking about the differences between men's and women's sexual fantasies, and he said, 'It seems to me women's sexual fantasies are kind of like eighteenth-century novels. There's all this kind of stuff around it, but there's never actually any sex. The fantasy is about the build up and the restraint, and the fact that it doesn't happen'. And then I said, 'So what are men's sexual fantasies like?' He kind of thought, and I said, 'They're just basically cunt aren't they? – an array

of genitalia.' And then I thought, 'Of course, that's where Ian has to go.'<sup>19</sup>

While the masturbation tableaux expresses the sexual obsessions Ian plays out with Cate in the first half of the play, its intention is very different from Lear's speech, where 'a glimpse of hell lies . . . between a woman's legs'.<sup>20</sup> Rather, the brief scene becomes more an expression of Ian's isolation and attempt to find imagined comfort. This in turn is reminiscent of Lear's fantasies of surrendering himself to the 'kind nursery' (I, i, 124) of Cordelia's care. For Ian, the centre of female sexuality changes from earlier associations of animal gratification and dominance over Cate (culminating in her rape) to a site that offers some measure of solace, especially when set against another image from the tableaux sequence, that of Ian '*hugging the Soldier's body for comfort*' (v, 60).

### Fathers and Daughters

In the early stages of writing the play Kane was unaware of utilizing or reinterpreting material from *King Lear*. In fact, it was not until after the first draft of *Blasted* had been completed that Shakespeare's play began to exert a conscious influence. At the time, this centred around the incident of Gloucester's blinding and Ian's loss of power over Cate:

Someone actually said to me after they read the first draft, 'Have you read *Lear*'? And then I read *Lear* and I thought there's something about blinding that is really theatrically powerful. And given also that Ian was a tabloid journalist I thought in a way it was a kind of castration, because obviously if you're a reporter your eyes are actually your main organ. So I thought rather than have him castrated, which felt melodramatic, I could go for a more kind of metaphorical castration.<sup>21</sup>

Kane's response to *King Lear* is an interesting one: 'For me it's really a play about fatherhood';<sup>22</sup> and, indeed, sinister or absent fathers recur in *Blasted*. For instance, Cate makes the disturbing comment that her fits have returned 'since Dad came back' (i, 10), and Ian expresses bitterness against his son: 'I'll send him an invite for the funeral' (i, 18). This

antipathy to fatherhood is best expressed in Ian's reply to Cate's question on how to best look after the baby found abandoned in the war zone outside the hotel: 'They shit and cry. Hopeless' (iv, 52).

In addition, a perverse father-daughter relationship establishes itself throughout the first part of *Blasted*, in which Ian and Cate's abusive relationship in the confines of the hotel room represents a dark inversion of Lear's memorable fantasy speech for himself and Cordelia: 'Come let's away to prison/ We two alone will sing like birds I'th cage' (V, iii, 8-9). In Shakespeare's play this image has generally been interpreted as a touching reconciliation between an estranged father and his daughter. Kane goes beyond this fond reverie and stresses the more selfish motivation behind the speech, whereby Lear claims Cordelia exclusively for himself.

Moreover, the obvious disparities in age (Ian is 45 and Cate 21) and Cate's childish habit of sucking her thumb (i, 14; v, 61), all serve to generate an alternative expression of the enigmatic comment regarding Lear's 'darker purpose' (I, i, 36), with its undertone of incestuous attraction to his youngest daughter. From the very start of *Blasted*, we realize Ian is determined to keep Cate bound to him as a possession: 'You know I love you. . . . Don't want you ever to leave' (i, 5). When she explains that she has a new boyfriend, Ian insists, 'You're more mine than his' (i, 16), and later locks the door to prevent her leaving (ii, 27).

In the second half of the play, after the entry of the Soldier, the hotel room changes from the prison chamber envisaged by Lear to the hovel that provides shelter and a precarious sanctuary from the 'pitiless storm' (III, ii, 29). Once blinded, Ian's dependence on Cate becomes more desperate, and despite our knowledge of his former cruelties to her, somehow oddly touching: 'Nowhere to go, where are you going to go? Bloody dangerous on your own. . . . Safer here with me' (iv, 53).

Cate's return and the closing image in the play, with Ian being fed by her, at first seem to suggest the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. Yet, despite her returning twice

to Ian and the play ending with the pair together, Kane excises any of the sentimentality that could arise from such a situation. Cordelia's unconditional words of forgiveness, 'No cause, no cause to her estranged father' (V, i, 68) are very different from Cate's 'You're a nightmare' (iv, 51), on seeing the blinded Ian for the first time. Moreover, on her final return, and observing Ian occupying the baby's grave, she actually ridicules his predicament:

CATE You're sitting under a hole.

IAN I know.

CATE Get wet.

IAN Aye.

CATE Stupid bastard. (v, 60)

Even the final tableaux of Cate feeding Ian is made ambiguous, and their reconciliation is fragile: Cate feeds herself first before tending to Ian and afterwards sits, '*apart from him, huddled for warmth*' (v, 61). In contrast, Cordelia, despite leading an army, does not seem to have been changed by war, and is still the loving and compassionate daughter we see in the opening scene. Whereas Ian's response to the trauma results in an embryonic re-discovery of his humanity, Cate's response is far more difficult to ascertain. She becomes a moral pragmatist, abandoning her horror of 'dead meat' (i, 7) and refusal to drink alcohol by consuming the sausage and gin she has bartered in return for sex with soldiers.

#### 'Cataracts and Hurricanoes'

The transition from Ian's defiant opening line – 'I've shat in better places than this' (i, 3) – to his humble 'Thank you' (v, 61) to the woman he has previously abused echoes a similar process in *King Lear*, whereby both Lear and Gloucester are violently stripped of patriarchal power and made to feel extreme physical and mental torment. *Blasted* shares the Shakespearean phenomenon Jonathan Dollimore calls the 'tragic paradox', whereby 'at the moment when Lear might be expected to be most brutalized he becomes most human'.<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare neatly divides physical suffering and mental torment between

Gloucester and Lear, whereas Kane makes Ian undergo both the blinding of Gloucester and the psychological disintegration of Lear.

Shakespeare represented this combination of suffering and insight during the storm on the heath, in which seemingly the final remnants of Lear's authority are shredded by the very elements themselves. Kane was to take the title of her play from this scene:

I was doing a workshop with this person who script-edited it and he said, 'Right, I'm going to the toilet, and when I come back tell me what the title of the play is you're going to write.' I knew it was about someone who got drunk a lot, so he came out and I said, 'I'm going to call it *Blasted*.' It was only kind of when I was into about the fourth draft I suddenly thought, 'Of course, it's the blasted heath!' And by that time I was already reading *Lear*, and it was beginning to influence it, but it was just sheerly coincidental, but once that happened I thought that maybe there was some subconscious drive to rewrite that play.<sup>24</sup>

*Blasted* also contains its own dramatic equivalent of the storm scene. While Kane does not drive her protagonist mad, she exposes Ian to a cataclysmic experience after which he has no choice but to confront his own fears and past behaviour. Kenneth Muir sees the storm scene in *King Lear* as central to this experience: 'The old Lear has died in the storm [and] is resurrected as a fully human being.'<sup>25</sup> Kane not only literally resurrects Ian from the dead in her rewriting, but rejects 'oak cleaving thunderbolts' (III, ii, 5) and 'all shaking thunder' (III, ii, 6) in favour of representing the power of the storm and its effect upon Ian through the figure of the Soldier.

Harley Granville Barker points out that the choice of storm as dramatic catalyst is entirely arbitrary: it's importance is the *effect* it has upon Lear.<sup>26</sup> Arnold Kettle argues that the dramatic importance of the scene is its ability to operate simultaneously on a number of levels as both 'the elemental storm, the social storm which shakes the divided kingdom [and] the inner storm that drives Lear mad'.<sup>27</sup> And Jan Kott, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, has commented that the grotesque in modern drama, which replaces Shakespearean tragedy, eschews external forces such as Nature, and sets the tragic scene in

places like Beckett's featureless rooms or (in a comment that applies to *Blasted*) Sartre's 'vast hotel consisting of rooms and corridors, beyond which there are more rooms and corridors'.<sup>28</sup>

All these observations seem to be at work in Kane's reinterpretation of the scene. Instead of representing Ian's suffering and insight through epic effects of *sturm und drang* she uses a series of silent tableaux (v, 59–60):

For Ian to experience a moment of utter terror, he has to get as low as humanly possible before he dies. I decided to take the most basic human activities – eating, sleeping, wanking, shitting – and see how awful they can be when you're really alone, which is pretty awful. But, as a storm scene in the same way as *King Lear*, I suppose it does become one, because Ian gets as low as he can get – he really does. But for me, it got to the point where I didn't know what words to use any more, and it was a complete breakdown of language. I thought I'm going to have to do this purely through image, which I'm happier doing anyway.<sup>29</sup>

In *King Lear*, the storm's threat forces Regan's household to shut their doors against its onslaught (II, ii, 480), and exposes Lear on the heath. In *Blasted*, it is the Soldier who represents the destructive force of the storm once Ian has opened the hotel door (ii, 36). Now Ian's nemesis will literally 'punish home' (III, iv, 16); and although the Soldier represents more than an elemental catalyst, Kane envisaged the character as the same kind of unstoppable force of nature:

The Soldier is a kind of personification of Ian's psyche in some sense, and it was a very deliberate thing. I thought the person who comes crashing through that door actually has to make Ian look like a baby in terms of violence – and I think that's successful. It's difficult because when you look at what Ian does to Cate it's utterly appalling, and you think, 'I can't imagine anything worse', and then something worse happens.<sup>30</sup>

During the 2001 revival of *Blasted* at the Royal Court, this rereading of the storm scene was recognized by certain critics, who detected the cataclysm building from the early scenes of the play. Benedict Nightingale, for instance, called the meeting of Ian

and the Soldier 'like some ontological El Nino' which 'spreads, proliferates, [and] spirals out of control'<sup>31</sup> after Ian rapes Cate.

Banishment and exposure to the storm forces Lear to reevaluate the relationship to his subjects, namely the 'poor naked wretches . . . / That bide the pitiless storm', and Lear acknowledges he has 'ta'en / too little care of this' (III, ii, 28–9). This acknowledgement of his own folly or, as Granville Barker termed it, 'dissipation of egoism',<sup>32</sup> is the outcome of the storm. Similarly, for Ian, his blinding, rape, and abandonment in the ruined hotel room bring about an acceptance of his culpability in failing to bear witness to the war, and through the act of sodomy by the Soldier, a realization that his rape of Cate has been revisited upon him. However, Kane prolongs this period of savage self-exposure, and whereas Lear's time upon the 'blasted heath' is relieved by the presence of comforters such as Kent, Gloucester, and the Fool, Ian is left alone for an indefinite period in which he both dies and returns to earth.

### Suffering Humanity

This process of protagonists being exposed to extreme and prolonged suffering is common to both plays, and is a response to Lear's rhetorical question at the height of the storm, 'Is man no more no more than this?' (III, iv, 96–7). Kane similarly shows Ian as 'unaccommodated man' (III, iv), and his final occupation of the baby's grave is a literal and memorable dramatization (also owing a debt to *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*) of the remark Lear makes in the opening scene of the play, that the remainder of his life is now a 'crawl toward death' (I, i, 41); and his later comment to Cordelia, 'You do me wrong to take me o'th' grave' (V, i, 38).

Lear thinks he has died and returned to earth (V, i, 49). In *Blasted* an actual resurrection takes place. The blinded Ian willingly crawls into the baby's makeshift grave and waits for death to claim him, yet the 'promised end' (V, ii, 239) Kent looks for in *King Lear* is denied to Ian. Kane explained that the death Ian so desperately craves to release him is indefinitely deferred:<sup>33</sup> 'He's dead, he's

in hell – and it's exactly the same place he was in before, except that now it's raining.'<sup>34</sup>

Along with Lear's assertion on the blasted heath that man is no more than a 'poor, bare, forked animal' (III, iv, 101–2), the source of Ian's cruelty and misogyny is looked for within his diseased body. While Lear's call to 'Let them anatomize Regan . . . is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts' (III, iv, 34–6), springs from his madness; Ian nonchalantly reveals that he has witnessed his own 'anatomization' while relating the story of seeing one of his own diseased lungs after an operation, describing it as a 'lump of rotting pork' (i, 11). Kane explains that Ian's terminal condition is 'This thing rotting him from the inside which he feeds.'<sup>35</sup>

### Dover Scenes

While *King Lear* unflinchingly examines the origins of human cruelty, it also attempts to offset these through acts of kindness and pity. Incidents include the Fool, Kent, and Gloucester accompanying Lear through the storm; the servant who intervenes and dies in the attempt to prevent Gloucester's blinding, and the other servant who suggests fetching 'flax and whites of eggs / to apply to his bleeding face'.<sup>36</sup> However, it is the Dover scene where the twin themes of cruelty and pity come together most starkly.

Kane also wanted to include a deliberate reworking of the Dover scene in *Blasted*. 'I struggled with Scene Four for a long time. It was a void in the play – I knew *something* went in there, I just couldn't think what. And then it dropped into my head. "It's Ian's Dover scene." As straightforward as that. A blatant rewrite of Shakespeare.'<sup>37</sup> In a direct echo of the meeting between Gloucester and Edgar, the blinded Ian urges Cate to allow him to end his life. She hands Ian the Soldier's gun – but removes its ammunition (v, 56).

Both Edgar and Cate also explain the failed suicide by citing the hand of divine intervention:

EDGAR Therefore, thou happy father,  
Think that the clearest gods, who make them  
honours



Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.  
(IV, v, 72-4)

IAN (puts the gun back in his mouth. He pulls the trigger. The gun clicks, empty. He shoots again. And again and again. He takes the gun out of his mouth) Fuck.

CATE Fate, see. You're not meant to do it. God –  
(iv, 56).

It is Edgar and Cate's kindness, interpreted at the time as acts of cruelty by the protagonists, that in both plays prevents the suicides taking place.

### The Promised End?

When *Blasted* was revived at the Royal Court in 2001, the critic Charles Spencer wrote, 'The final image is one of charity and desperate, courageous endurance that puts one in mind of *King Lear*'.<sup>38</sup> However, one could equally argue that rather than showing fortitude, the play actually dramatizes a moral passivity in the face of social chaos. Philip C. McGuire comments that the end of *King Lear* is one of 'pained human choice and weary effort [among] . . . the debris of the shattered state',<sup>39</sup> and also makes the point that the play is unique among Shakespeare's tragedies in that no firm alternative power structure readily asserts itself to restore equilibrium.

The 'gored state' V, iii, 296) in which Shakespeare's play ends is akin to that of the last scene in *Blasted*, played out among the bombed out wreckage of the hotel room. Here even less seems to be resolved, as the civil war still rages beyond the shelter Ian and Cate use as their refuge. Both seem able only to survive the war taking place outside through a philosophy based on stoicism in the face of social collapse. This feeling of defeated acceptance in both plays is grounds for criticism, and indeed is one of the chief reasons behind Edward Bond's decision to rework Shakespeare's play in *Lear* (1971).<sup>40</sup>

### Neo-Jacobean or In-Yer-Face?

While Kane's work was identified at the time with other emerging writers of the mid-'nineties such as Judy Upton, Nick Grosso,

and Jez Butterworth, by the time of her death in 1999 fellow dramatist Mark Ravenhill described her as 'a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility'.<sup>41</sup>

Aleks Sierz makes a convincing argument that this generation of writers grappled with the shared theme of the end of ideology, exemplified by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Sierz identifies 'in-yr-face' drama as a 'theatre of sensation',<sup>42</sup> arguing that both developments are positive responses to changes in British society,<sup>43</sup> but Vera Gottlieb is more pessimistic about the impact of these writers. Conceding that they captured their generation's aimlessness and obsession with consumer and popular culture, she argues that the plays ultimately become what they attempt to critique:

In effect the plays end up as 'products': the 'themes' of consumerism, drug culture, and sexuality paralyze the plays. . . . The plays of the 'nineties seem to have moved even further away from the politically oppositional, and have given up any attempt to engage with significant public issues.<sup>44</sup>

Peter Ansorge takes Jez Butterworth's Royal Court debut, *Mojo* (1995), as a case in point:

It was a startling debut that only begged the question of the point of it all. *Mojo* tells us nothing new about Soho in the 1950s. It is purely an effective location for a series of violent actions that delighted a predominantly young audience weaned on [Tarantino's] *Reservoir Dogs*.<sup>45</sup>

Ian Herbert's verdict on the play was that 'we have been dehumanized and we're loving it'.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast, the extreme states and situations that operate in Kane's drama are presented with the opposite effect in mind: to shock us into regaining our humanness. This largely removes her work from the slick, modish, and often socio-realist concerns of her contemporaries, and places her closer to the tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists such as Marlowe and Webster, whose protagonists likewise often encounter and embrace violent catastrophe.

This kinship with classical tragedy is an important strand running through Kane's

work. Her rewriting of *Phaedra's Love*, using Seneca's version of the myth, is an obvious example, while she openly acknowledged her debt to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in *Cleansed*. The latter is the most 'Jacobean' of her plays, and one can also detect in its writing the strong influences of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Ford's *'Tis Pity she's a Whore*.<sup>47</sup>

This return to the classical text by the modern dramatist is the subject of an essay by the dramatist Howard Barker. Kane described Barker as 'the Shakespeare of our Age'<sup>48</sup> and his plays and writings about theatre exerted an immense influence on her own dramatic practice. Barker argues that while much contemporary drama feels happy to embrace 'domestic' subjects – for example, child abuse, drug addiction, and gang violence – it is not comfortable in presenting dramatically the subjects that preoccupied Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. Tragedy on the scale of Lear's ordeal is no longer deemed a relevant way of commenting on the human condition. Such drama has been consigned to the role of theatrical artefacts, held up as epitomes of 'culture', or suitable subjects for academic study.

Opposing this 'taming' of past tragic form, Barker believes that 'the secret of tragedy – its inviolable secret' is still to be found – albeit buried – in the 'pleasures and dangers of the classical text, now consigned to the realms of cultural archaeology'.<sup>49</sup> contemporary drama which calls itself tragic is merely 'a drama of accidents masquerading as tragedy', while 'the tragedies of the 1960s were rather failures of the social services'.<sup>50</sup>

For Barker, tragedy is the dark anathema to 'the rhetoric of access',<sup>51</sup> which he sees as a function of postmodern society, together with its 'loathing of a secret'.<sup>52</sup> Tragedy is an act of defiance to received notions of ideology, politics or religion –

the illegitimate of all art forms, the most devastating to social orders and consequently, the most de-civilizing, the darkest, and yet simultaneously the most life-affirming, for precisely by standing so close to the rim of the abyss it delivers expression to the inexpressible, and stages emotions the so-called open society finds it impossible to con-

template.<sup>53</sup>

Not only do all of Kane's characters stand close to the 'rim of the abyss', but often they launch themselves into the abyss itself. Barker believes that for an audience such moments 'liberate language from banality [and] return poetry to speech', and in so doing, 'restore pain to the individual'.<sup>54</sup> This restoration of tragedy is at odds with contemporary views of the form – where a car accident can be deemed 'a tragedy' – as it exposes a contemporary audience to the unfamiliar emotions of which Barker speaks.

Kane's drama very much concerns itself with the restoration of these emotions. Bond believes there to be two types of dramatists: 'The first sort play theatrical games with reality. . . . The second sort of dramatists change reality. The Greeks and Shakespeare did it.'<sup>55</sup> Bond believes that Kane falls into this secondary category, and I would argue that it is her incorporation of classical dramatic form into a modern setting that marks her out from her contemporaries.

David Greig remarks that early responses to *Blasted* saw Kane as an imitator of slick violence in the manner of Tarantino, whereas her true influence came from what he calls 'Shakespearean anatomies of reduced men: Lear on the heath and Timon in his cave'.<sup>56</sup> This feature was sustained throughout her work, and whereas her contemporary Mark Ravenhill enjoys littering his plays with references to contemporary and popular culture (such as naming all the characters in *Shopping and Fucking* after members of the boy band *Take That*), Kane's drama is notable for its careful exclusion of elements which would betray the time at which it was written. It is themes such as faith and disbelief, redemption and damnation, that play themselves out here rather than reworked dramatizations of contemporary events.

T. R. Henn observes that the practice of recycling ancient myths by successive generations of dramatists, whereby the fable is 're-clothed effectively on what is basically the old skeleton',<sup>57</sup> is essentially a symbiotic practice, and that 'if the dramatist succeeds, he has at his disposal elements that lend

themselves to effects of great delicacy and profundity; as well as a ready-made device for universalizing the significance of his dramatic statement'.<sup>58</sup> Bond believes Kane was a writer who attempted to dramatize 'the ultimate in human experience';<sup>59</sup> and while Sierz argues that Kane's contemporaries were questioning postmodern dilemmas such as the end of history, ideology, and the so-called 'crisis of masculinity', arguably it was the exuberance and energy of plays such as Michael Wynne's *The Knocky* (1994) and Nick Grosso's *Peaches* (1994) that sustained them rather than any central compelling idea.

By contrast, the issues examined in Kane's drama were essentially existential, concerning man's place in the universe and relationship with God, love as an obsession, and sexual fulfilment as both ecstatic and destructive. Ultimately it was these concerns that have succeeded in placing her drama more directly in a classical than contemporary tradition.

## Notes and References

1. Sarah Kane, 'Brief Encounter', platform, Royal Holloway College, London, 3 November 1998.
2. Dan Rebellato observes: 'It increasingly seems clear that for many people British theatre in the 1990s hinges on that premiere.' See 'Sarah Kane: an Appreciation', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 59 (1999), p. 280.
3. Brian Logan, 'The Savage Mark of Kane', *Independent on Sunday*, 1 April 2001.
4. Nick Curtis, 'Random Tour in a Chamber of Horrors', *Evening Standard*, 19 January 1995.
5. Samuel Johnson believed that the onstage blinding of Gloucester was a gratuitous act, unconnected with the main thrust of the play, while A. C. Bradley objected to the scene on the grounds that 'the physical horror of such a spectacle would in the theatre be a sensation so violent as to overpower the purely tragic emotions.' See A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1904, ed. of 1967), p. 251.
6. While several critics, including Jack Tinker ('This Disgusting Feast of Filth', *Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995) and Charles Spencer ('Night the Theatre Critics Cracked', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 January 1995) recognized the relationship between *Blasted* and the Shakespearean depiction of violence, in both cases they were dismissive. Charles Spencer, for instance, commented, 'Miss Kane's supporters may claim Shakespeare included equally explicit scenes. Unfortunately she isn't as good a writer.'
7. With the possible exception of David Edgar's *Pentecost* (1994). Yet this play is not specifically about the Serbian/Bosnian conflict, but rather an epic look through history to the present in order to understand the forces that shape an 'unnamed south-east European country' (London: Nick Hern, 1995, p. x).

8. Sheridan Morley, *Spectator*, 28 January 1995.
9. Clare Bayley, 'A Very Angry Young Woman', *Independent*, 23 January 1995.
10. Alexander Leggatt, *King Lear* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988), p. 13.
11. Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001). References denote scene and page number.
12. John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare: the Tragedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 232.
13. Cited in Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 98.
14. Elizabeth Sakellariou, 'New Faces for British Political Theatre', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, XX (1999), p. 47. In pre-performance scripts for the first public performance of *Blasted* on 3 July 1993, at the University of Birmingham, Kane gives the Soldier an eastern European name (Vladek), and specific references are made to the Bosnian war in his exchanges with Ian. See Graham Saunders, 'Love Me or Kill Me': *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 52-3.
15. Sarah Kane, 'Brief Encounter'.
16. Kenneth Muir, ed., Introduction to the Arden edition of *King Lear* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. liii.
17. All quotations from *King Lear* are taken from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, ed., *William Shakespeare: the Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
18. Derek Cohen, *Shakespeare's Culture of Violence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 103.
19. Sarah Kane, personal interview with author, London, 12 June 1995.
20. Leggatt, *King Lear*, p. 82.
21. Sarah Kane, personal interview.
22. Ibid.
23. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 189.
24. Sarah Kane, personal interview.
25. Muir, p. xlix.
26. Granville Barker, *Preface to King Lear* (London: Nick Hern, 1993), p. 37.
27. Arnold Kettle, 'From Hamlet to Lear', in Kiernan Ryan, ed., *King Lear: Contemporary Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 22.
28. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 106.
29. Letter to author, 31 March 1997.
30. Sarah Kane, personal interview.
31. Benedict Nightingale, *The Times*, 4 April 2001.
32. Barker, *Preface to King Lear*, p. 34.
33. Alexander Leggatt reports that John Gielgud's first reaction in a 1950 production of *King Lear*, during the restoration scene with Cordelia was, 'resentment at being brought out of the grave'. Leggatt, *King Lear*, p. 85.
34. Letter to author, 31 October 1997.
35. Sarah Kane, personal interview.
36. This incident is only present in the quarto text, entitled *The History of King Lear* (Scene 14, 104-5).
37. Letter to author, 31 October 1997.
38. Charles Spencer, 'Admirably Repulsive', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 April 2001.
39. Philip C. McGuire, *Shakespeare: the Jacobean Plays* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1994), p. 105. Jan Kott makes a similar observation in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*: 'Between the prologue and the epilogue there is civil war. But unlike in the Histories and Tragedies, the world

is not healed again', p. 120.

40. Lou Lappin, *The Art and Politics of Edward Bond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 123.

41. Mark Ravenhill, Obituary, *Independent*, 23 February 1999.

42. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 4.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

44. Vera Gottlieb, 'Lukewarm Britain', in Colin Chambers and Vera Gottlieb, ed., *Theatre in a Cool Climate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 212.

45. Peter Ansorge, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles*, p. 60.

46. Cited in Sierz, p. 163.

47. See Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me'*, p. 95–8.

48. Rebellato, 'Sarah Kane: an Appreciation', p. 280.

49. Howard Barker, *Arguments for a Theatre*, 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.173.

50. *Ibid.*, p.18.

51. *Ibid.*, p.172.

52. *Ibid.*, p.18.

53. *Ibid.*, p.172.

54. *Ibid.*, p.18.

55. Edward Bond, 'Sarah Kane and Theatre', in Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me'*, p. 189.

56. David Greig, in Kane, *Complete Plays*, p. x.

57. T. R. Henn. *The Harvest of Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1956 ), p. 233.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

59. Bond, 'Sarah Kane and Theatre', p. 190.