

Re-envisioning crowned heads: A Comparative Analysis of Power and Tragedy in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Edward Bond's *Lear*

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Abstract

Bond's *Lear* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, set in a dystopian society where oppression, violence and revenge are rife. The play examines the human condition in the world where corruption and tyranny are literally everywhere. However, the brutality of the human being in the play is not uncalled for; it is a reflection of the times when greed, power conflicts make the world a horrible place to live in. The play's characters, *Lear* in particular, are flawed and multi-dimensional; they are Bond's imaging of human beings in a demeaning, heartless world. Bond's portrayal of *Lear* is not merely a parody of a deranged, insane monarch; rather, he is a profoundly damaged and multifaceted individual, whose terrible destiny stems from both his personal failings as a king, as a father and the societal circumstances that mould him and shape his identity in the society. Bond's portrayal of *Lear* shows him to be a man capable of both extreme cruelty and deep affection. He is one of those men who is both a victim and an aggressor of the violence in his environment. This paper will try to probe and analyse the intricacies and workings of the labyrinthine minds of the play's characters which are a compelling exploration of the human experience.

Keywords: Violence, corruption, sexual violence, power conflicts, intertextuality

In the world of art and culture, we find that literary texts influence and create or rather re-create other texts. In this connection we may refer to T.S. Eliot's comment in *The Tradition and Individual Talent* that "art never improves, but...the material of art is never quite the same." (27) Edward Said remarked that the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting. The 'rewriting' impulse is not simply an act of 'imitation', it is a sort of re-creation, an intertextual relation between the two texts. When Roland Barthes declares that any text is an intertext we feel that works of previous and surrounding cultures are always present in literature. Thus, literary texts are built from various systems, codes and traditions established by earlier works of literature. Any art form like music, dance, and literature are a living mosaic, a dynamic intersection of textual surfaces.

In the field of adaptation and appropriation, Shakespeare is a heavy industry—a permanent source of supplying materials for re-creation and re-vision. In his seminal work *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* John Elsom announces:

Shakespeare is an elastic writer. He can be stretched in many

directions before he snaps. Sometimes, by emphasizing this aspect of a play rather than that, a new perspective can be gained on the play as a whole... (4)

Michael Scott has rightly observed: “He remains big business today, recreationally and educationally”.(1) Ben Jonson’s eulogy that the Bard of Avon is ‘for all time’ becomes hauntingly true in present day socio-economic-cultural context. As a dramatist, Shakespeare’s ‘universality’ is peculiar in that his artifacts are not ‘fixed’. He is ‘still our contemporary’, demanding a more creative response not only from the reader but also from the performer, as his plays are ‘period piece’, only superficially, they go on growing and developing, having a life of their own. Modern dramatists look back to Shakespeare to find socio-cultural conditions which reflect the present-day scenario. They are engaged with a kind of creative dialogue, a creative collision with the past to comment upon and critique the terrible and the tumultuous contemporary reality.

Among the Post - fifties playwrights, Edward Bond is remarkable for his adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* to give shape to his play *Lear* (1972). Bond gives justification for his re-write of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. He says that Shakespeare’s play is fascinating and he wants to deal with the Shakespearean myth in his own terms. He is not a blind worshipper of Shakespeare: “I very much object to the worshipping of that play by the academic theatre... because it is totally dishonest experience.” (qtd.in Brown 143) Bond’s *Lear* deviates from the master text in many ways. Unlike Shakespeare, Bond has the urgency to show that in the modern world, we are not only to endure our problems but to devise a way of solving them. His *Lear* accepts responsibility for his life and commits himself to action, the breaking of the wall. And, we can rightly say that the “Wall”, is a symbol of oppressive ruling authority built by Bond’s *Lear*, a dramatic innovation that was finally broken by *Lear* himself.

Bond is an instinctive dramatist who knows his art form well and his audience. To reject or ridicule Shakespeare totally would be to invite a rejection of his play rather than a consideration of the myth of Shakespeare by his audience. For Bond, Shakespeare should be treated and judged in terms of historical perspective. He thought that the bardolatry from Schlegel to the present needs to be buried. In the *Rational Theatre* Bond writes: “Shakespeare is not for all time, and even in his own time he was in many ways out of date.” (Scott 35) In *Lear*, Bond invites comparison with Shakespeare’s finest achievement. His success is that he creates a work that looks back to Shakespeare yet survives entirely free of it as an original work of art. One notable ‘re-write’ of *King Lear* was done as early as in 1681 by Nahum Tate who gave the play a happy ending.

For Bond the challenge is to demythologize Shakespeare’s play, finding a point of contact with the audience which disturbs and problematizes the issues in a naked but rational manner. As with Shakespeare, Bond looks towards sexual violence, but he places it within a new context. Fontanelle’s unfulfilled sexual desire is suggestive of the tyranny to which she aspires and the political system of which she is a part. Bond deliberately shocks and possibly

offends his audience by attacking their sense of decorum. But in doing so illustrates his point by heightening the audience's awareness. The portrait of Fontanelle is to be contrasted with the violent physicality of Bodice who, like her sister, sexually desires Warrington. In *King Lear* both Goneril and Regan are in love with Edmund and both plan to destroy each other so as to enjoy him in power. There is an effective parallelism between the two, but Bond is able to create a unique mark of his own. Warrington is the modern Edmund figure and ultimately becomes the Gloucester figure as the women decide that he is too dangerous and has to be silenced.

The relation between Warrington and the two women verges on sadistic delight and ecstatic, energetic and physical longing. Bodice comments upon the irrational behaviour of her sister but then indulges in her own means of depraved sexual violence. The conversation between Bodice and Fontanelle verges on grotesque degeneration:

Bodice. We must shut him up inside himself. (*She pokes the needles into Warrington's ears.*)

I'll just jog these in and out a little. Doodee, doodee, doodee, doo.

Fontanelle. He can see my face but can't hear me laugh!

Bodice. Fancy! Like staring into a silent storm.

Fontanelle. And now his eyes.

Bodice. No... I think not. (15)

It is a dramatization of utter sexual violence. Bond presents the fascination and the horror of the deeds which is very much shocking for the audience. He uses the choric use of the soldier who comments, "what a pair!". (14) The effect of alienation is increased through the deliberate feeding from the Shakespearean play.

There are parallels and contrasts between Bond's artifact and that of the Shakespearean one. A commonplace critical connotation of *King Lear* is that the blinding of Gloucester parallels and reflects Lear's inner blindness. In the modern version this interpretative point is placed both in and out by the dramatist. In Bond, Warrington is not blinded and he parallels not only Gloucester but Edmund. Lear later is blinded in a clinical manner, the eyes being removed by 'a scientific device'. Michael Scott sees it as 'a Nazi-type experimental machine' (Scott 40). Lear cries out in pain: "Aahhh! The sun! It hurts my eyes." (63)

In contrast to Shakespeare, Bond's Lear has two daughters – Bodice and Fontanelle. There are parallels between Regan and Bodice and between Goneril and Fontanelle. Goneril and Fontanelle are both selfish and passionate. Shakespeare's Cordelia is dutifully loving when her sisters are treacherous. Bond chooses to place his Cordelia outside the Royal family; she rises to prominence as a revolutionary leader. Bond's Cordelia survives, although all forces are gathering against her. In Bond's play the Gravedigger's Boy fulfils in part the roles of Fool and Edgar, but he does not survive. Bond leaves Cordelia desperately trying to impose her idea of law and order on a battle-scarred nation. Bond's objective is to 'provide a meaning to the story' which will make the old tale seem relevant and truthful to a modern

audience. In much the same way, Shakespeare filtered the chronicles of the Middle Ages through an essentially Tudor sensibility.

Both the playwrights depend upon divergent views of human nature. Shakespeare's *Lear* states:

“Then let them anatomise Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (195)

In Bond's play, the autopsy on Fontanelle leads *Lear* to appropriate the potential beauty and goodness of humanity: “She sleeps inside like a lion and a lamb and a child. The things are so beautiful. I am astonished. I have seen anything so beautiful.” (59) For Shakespeare, the problem begins when authority is weakened and ‘Things fall apart’. Shakespeare's *Lear* spends his life discovering what the world is, essentially like. Bond's *Lear* realizes that things do not have to be the way they are. In both cases the realization is pathetic and somewhat tragic.

In the Shakespearean tragedy, we note a metaphysical transcendence achieved through the knowledge of the self and the human condition. In Bond, within the mythical story of Shakespeare's *Lear*, there is a debate about society corrupting itself through its organization and philosophy. Bond's Cordelia is Shakespeare's Cordelia enjoying the power. In Act 3 of Bond's *Lear*, *Lear* begs Cordelia to pull down the wall and he receives a refusal from her. He tells Cordelia: “Then nothing's changed! A revolution must at least reform!”. (84) Ironically enough, Cordelia becomes not a true revolutionary but an oppressor. The wall is the dominant symbol of oppression. Bond's play seems to suggest that by destroying the barrier of darkness in society true freedom will be found and with it true justice will be achieved. Bond announces in his Preface to the play as “allowing people to live in the way for which they evolved.” Bond suggests that violence shapes and obsesses our society. The message of the play is that any form of change must come from within the individual. This will come with the destruction of capitalism. Bond tries to suggest that moral commitment is not enough, an artist must have an ‘ideological programme’ with which he is to function as a catalyst to change political institutions.

This paper is an attempt to re-turn to Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the process of judging Bond's *Lear* and to show the originality of the post- modern playwright. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is overcharged with cosmic vision, Bond's *Lear* seems to suggest that modern society is essentially ‘rotten’ and a new social system must evolve to ‘make it right’, allowing people to live a life of freedom and choice.

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