

How Much Is Too Much? : Violence in Shakespeare's King Lear and Sarah Kane's Blasted.

April Eve DAY

That tragedies are violent is an unavoidable truth, from the beginnings of tragic theatre to the modern day. Shakespeare's tragedies and those of his contemporaries were frequently bloody and brutal, with *King Lear* being no exception. The works of modern playwrights such as Edward Bond and Sarah Kane also feature shocking scenes of violence. Sarah Kane's *Blasted* is a prime example of a contemporary tragedy that uses stage violence. However, the mere inclusion of violence in tragedy is not enough for it to contribute to the success of the tragedy. It must first of all be appropriate for the audience and take into account their prior exposure to violence. Secondly, if the tragic hero uses violence, they must do so without isolating themselves from the audience. Finally, the violence must be an integral part of a plot which is logical and reasonable rather than being added simply for effect. According to these conventions, Shakespeare expertly employs violence to drive the tragic plot of *King Lear*, but the violence in *Blasted* has the opposite effect, causing emotional distance and confusion.

Most tragedies contain violence in some shape or form, yet attention must be paid to the relative palatability of the violence. If the level of violence is appropriate for the audience who view it, it can be beneficial to the tragedy. The violence in *King Lear*, while it may have inspired pity when viewed, would not have been particularly shocking for the viewers for whom it was written. Far from being strangers to the sight of blood, Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were witnesses to such events as the plague and frequent public executions (Nunn 68). The desensitisation that this caused is reflected in Early Modern theatre, which depicted scenes of violence as realistically as possible. Plays such as George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* used sheep's blood, lungs, heart and liver as stage props (Mabillard). According to Simkin (17), the root of staged violence was in

playwrights' growing obsession with the fragility of the human body. Yet rather than inspire revulsion and offense, the violent manipulation of the body onstage served to strengthen the bond between the audience and the characters. Although tragedies of this era were typically about high-stationed individuals, the body was one thing that every audience member shared with the characters. To witness a body being violated was to appreciate their own body as equally violable, thereby increasing feelings of empathy (Simkin 17). When Gloucester was blinded on stage in *King Lear*, for example, Early Modern audiences would have been mentally prepared by their prior exposure to real violence, nullifying any shock or distraction, and they would have imagined their own eyes being plucked out, intensifying their feelings of pity and fear for Gloucester.

When a play as old as *King Lear* is staged today, the audience has automatic temporal distance; the violence is less affecting because it is not about them. In contrast, extreme violence involving contemporary characters on the modern stage routinely produces reactions of shock, revulsion and offense. While we do undeniably live in a violent age, there is a fundamental difference between our experience of violence today and that of Shakespeare's audience. Shakespeare's contemporaries came face to face with violence every day, yet people today usually only come face to screen with it. We see scenes of horrendous violence on television, in the cinema and on the internet, yet it is rare for us to encounter violence right in front of us. The scene when Ian is raped by the soldier in *Blasted*, for example, should in theory bring the audience closer to Ian as they imagine themselves being violated and therefore feel intense pity for him. Yet of the multitude of reviews that were written after the first performance of *Blasted*, very few mention any emotion other than distress at this unprecedented event occurring before them (Carney 280). Unlike Early Modern audiences, audiences today are not desensitised enough to real violence to be able to witness it onstage without a feeling of shock, which would thus override their feelings of empathy for the victim of violence and decrease the power of the tragedy.

Whether onstage or off, violence has the power to affect the potency of the tragedy, particularly when it is used by the tragic hero. According to Aristotle (cited in Leech 46), the tragic hero must be an essentially good person who makes a fatal error which brings about their downfall. One of the most important features of the tragic hero is that they must be worthy of empathy. This is the person through whom the audience

experience the tragedy, and for this experience to be complete they must establish a connection with them and understand their mistakes. This relationship must endure throughout the play in order for the audience to appreciate the tragedy in the demise of the hero. Their use of violence risks severing this link between themselves and the audience, so it is therefore of primary importance that the audience see their violent actions as forgivable.

Lear is a somewhat violent character, but he manages to maintain his bond with the audience due to his human qualities and the circumstances under which he becomes aggressive. Although Lear's character is not thoroughly developed before he makes his fatal mistake, he can be recognised as an essentially good man. The source of his tragic error is a need for love from his daughters. This is a universal need which immediately establishes a union between Lear and the audience. His mistake is to look for verbal proof of this love from his daughters. When he does not receive this proof from Cordelia, he reacts by banishing her, likening his feeling for her to his love for the "barbarous Scythian, or he that makes his generation messes to gorge his appetite". When he attempts to reason with her, Lear also banishes Kent, vowing that the moment he sees him again "that moment will be thy death". While Lear's reaction is undeniably extreme and verbally aggressive, he stops short of actual physical violence. Because he does not overstep this boundary, the audience, empathising with his need for love, are able to envision themselves having a similar reaction if their need was not fulfilled, and their bond with Lear therefore endures through this verbally violent episode. There are subsequent points in the play when Lear does become physically violent, such as when he beats Oswald for failing to bring him to Goneril. However, this takes place after Oswald has conspired with Goneril to treat Lear with "weary negligence", and Lear is motivated by anger at this treatment. This draws a favourable distinction between himself and characters who act in cold blood (Foakes 90). Thus, despite his use of violence, Lear is still a tragic figure who is capable of commanding empathy and the audience are able to care for him when he meets his tragic end.

Unlike Lear, Ian's link with the audience is severed by his violent behaviour. Initially, there are many similarities between Lear and Ian. Like Lear, Ian has an insecure need for love. He constantly tells Cate that he loves her and wants evidence of her feelings for him, both verbally and physically. When she does not give him the desired reaction, he

becomes verbally abusive, saying that she should not “push your cunt in my face then take it away ‘cause I stick my tongue out.” While this verbal abuse is shocking, many audience members would at this point be able to understand this as an extreme but essentially forgivable reaction to unrequited love, just as they can understand Lear’s reaction to Cordelia’s apparent rejection of his affections. However, Ian takes his reaction even further than verbal violence to physical violence, and we subsequently learn that he has violently raped Cate during the night. Although the rape does not take place on stage, it does not appear to be sparked by anger like Lear’s violent behaviour. Ian’s last action before the rape is to tell Cate that he loves her and offer her a bouquet of flowers, suggesting that when he rapes her later in the night, he is not motivated by anger, but commits the act in cold blood. While audience members may be able to see themselves acting verbally violent in Ian’s position and therefore forgive him, it is unlikely that they could envision themselves committing rape. From this point onwards the audience are emotionally distanced from Ian. They cease to care about what will happen to him next, making him impotent as a tragic hero.

The hero is an integral part of a tragedy, but of equal importance is the tragic plot itself. According to Thomas Rymer (cited in Leech 47), the purpose of tragedy is to make sense of the world. Every event that occurs should therefore be a part of a chain reaction set off by the tragic hero’s fatal mistake, bringing a logic to events that is absent from real life. Violence, if used, must be embedded in the plot, arising from prior events and having later consequences. If used in this way, violence can make errors more significant, heroes more deserving of pity, and, ultimately, tragedies more tragic. However, if the violence does not stem directly from the plot, it is in danger of being gratuitous and significantly reducing the power of the tragedy.

King Lear epitomises a tragic plot that successfully makes use of violence. Goneril and Regan’s violent rule, Lear’s exposure to the storm, Cordelia’s hanging and Gloucester’s blinding can all be traced back to a chain of events begun at the start of the play. Before he even divides up his kingdom between his daughters, Lear’s characterisation suggests that his rule of his kingdom and family was authoritarian and somewhat arrogant, and he himself even says that he has neglected his people. Thus, he is a role model for Goneril and Regan, who emulate him as rulers, but take his idea of absolute authority to the extreme (Foakes 92). This leads to them casting him out in the middle of a raging storm,

effectively leaving him for dead. Similarly, Lear's banishment of Cordelia leads directly to her hanging because it means that when she re-enters his kingdom to save him from her sisters, she must do so as an outlaw, giving Edmund a valid excuse to have her killed (Foakes 92). Gloucester's blinding can likewise be traced back to the beginning of the play, when he chooses to believe Edmund, the son who will deliver him into the hands of his enemies, over Edgar, the son who would have protected him. Rooted as they are in seemingly small mistakes, the violence in these events makes them all the more tragic. Each action has a larger consequence, multiplying the tension and pushing the tragedy towards its cathartic end.

While the violence in *King Lear* is a part of the logical progression of the play, *Blasted*'s scenes of brutality bear little relation to its plot, leaning more towards the irrationality of real life than the "tightly wound spring" that is tragedy (Anouilh, cited in Leech 49). Ian bears some similarity to Lear in his shocking treatment of Cate. However, while Lear's behaviour towards all three of his daughters comes back to haunt him, Cate does not become aggressive like Goneril and Regan, nor does Ian's treatment of her have any larger consequences within the play. As Lear goes from a castle to a "blasted heath" where he is exposed to the storm, so Ian goes from an expensive hotel to a pile of rubble when it is bombed. Yet Lear is cast out by his daughters as a direct result of his past behaviour, whereas the bombing of Ian's hotel comes from a force entirely extraneous to the plot of the play, having nothing to do with his prior behaviour. Similarly, Ian's subjection to rape by the soldier, while it does imply a kind of justice for his prior rape of Cate, is not linked to his past actions. The soldier rapes Ian in order to come to terms with the rape and murder of his girlfriend (Saunders 75), an event that involved neither Ian nor Cate. In an equally violent action, the soldier sucks out Ian's eyes and eats them, echoing the blinding of Gloucester. Yet Gloucester's blinding is part of a chain reaction of events, while there is nothing in the plot of *Blasted* that can be seen as causing this event. With these violent scenes which appear to have neither antecedents nor consequences, *Blasted* does the exact opposite to what Thomas Rymer (cited in Leech, 47) suggests a tragedy should do. *Blasted* presents a situation like reality, it does not make sense of it.

King Lear and *Blasted* could both be described as violent tragedies, but the violence in *King Lear* is advantageous to its success, while in *Blasted* it is a hindrance to its intelligibility. Shakespeare employed violence in *King Lear* at a time when it was a

common occurrence in real life, meaning that it deepened audiences' relationships with the characters. In contrast, Kane confronts audiences with real people in scenes of brutality just a few feet away, the likes of which are rarely seen today. This causes a reaction that is counter-productive to the tragedy, shocking viewers into numbness. The tragic hero in King Lear is not beyond reproach; he makes errors often involving violence, but, significantly, Shakespeare leads the audience to see these acts as justifiable and even things that they themselves would do. As a result, the connection between viewers and Lear remains unbroken, and is even strengthened by his use of violence. Unlike Lear, Ian's violent actions in *Blasted* render him irredeemable to the point that they cease to feel empathy for him. Finally, King Lear conforms to the idea that tragedy should be a logical chain of events. Each event, including those that are violent, is in a cause and effect relationship with another, increasing audience feelings of pity as each domino falls. Conversely, the violent events in *Blasted* occur randomly, bearing no relationship to any other incident in the plot, and failing to help the audience make sense of the play or, indeed, the world.

Bibliography

- Barker, Francis. *The Culture of Violence: Tragedy and History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993
- Bond, Edward. *Lear*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1972
- Carney, Sean. "The Tragedy of History in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*." *Theatre Survey* 46:2 (2005) 275-296
- Foakes, R A. *Shakespeare and Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003
- Kane, Sarah. *Blasted*. London: Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2001
- King, Kimball. *Western Drama Through the Ages*. Westport: Greenwood press, 2007
- Leech, Clifford. *Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 1994
- Mabillard, Amanda. *Violence in Shakespeare's Plays*. Shakespeare Online. 2000. (10/09/2010)
< <http://www.shakespeareonline.com/plays/violenceinshakespeare.html> >
- Marshall, Cynthia. *The shattering of the Self*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002
- Nunn, Hillary. *Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy*. Hants: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005
- Saunders, Graham. "Out, Vile Jelly: Sarah Kane's 'Blasted' and Shakespeare's 'King Lear'." *NTQ* 20:1 (2004) 69-78
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. London: Penguin Books, 1972
- Simkin, Stevie. *Early Modern Tragedy and the Cinema of Violence*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006