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# Unlimited passion: the opposing schools of stage violence in Shakespeare and Kane

Lukas Brasherfons  
*University of Iowa*

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UNLIMITED PASSION: THE OPPOSING SCHOOLS OF STAGE VIOLENCE IN  
SHAKESPEARE AND KANE

by

Lukas Brasherfons

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Art Borreca

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Lukas Brasherfons

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Theatre Arts (Dramaturgy) at the May 2017 graduation.

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Dare Clubb

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Paul Kalina

To Sam Hubbard, Kathryn Acosta, and Ben Peterson, who made stage combat look like what the cool people did. To John McFarland and David Woolley for giving me the skills and thought necessary to consider the discipline, and whose teachings form the bedrock of my philosophies. And to Alison Ruth, my comrade-in-arms, without whose aid my musings would be out of joint, and my life uninhabited.

“There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching.”

Susan Sontag  
*Regarding the Pain of Others*

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

William Shakespeare and Sarah Kane are playwrights who for drastically different reasons have left indelible impacts upon the theatrical world. A key factor in each of their plays is the presentation of violence. Shakespeare uses violence for observable, orthodox reasons of driving the plot forward, while Kane uses it for sensory effect, social commentary, and for subverting traditional narrative expectations. This study examines how violence and fighting work as dramaturgical tools in these playwrights' work, by individual examination, juxtaposition, and the use of other pieces of drama to inform these two differing schools of theatrical violence.

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## INTRODUCTION

While drawing binary definitions about What Aristotle Did and Didn't Mean is often a losing battle that says more about the critic than the criticized, his place as a dramaturgical touchstone remains crucial. In part VI of his *Poetics*, Aristotle speaks of the six characteristic components of tragedy. Of his fifth item, spectacle, he says the following:

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet. (29-31)

Here, Plato's student leaves us with an intriguing question: can a line be drawn between inherent dramaturgy, and external dramaturgy? Do aspects of a play become "less artistic" the further they get away from a playwright's pen? Are emotional reactions generated by stagecraft disingenuous? In "Why Read Plays," Edward Albee said: "I am convinced that in proper performance all should vanish – acting, direction, design, even writing – and we should be left with the author's intention uncluttered" (1). A nice idea, though largely untenable, as it leaves the final arbiter of whether a production "worked" or "did not work" its original author (a voice not eternally present), and is based on a nebulous principle, since the vanishing of theatrical practitioners in service of a single auteur's vision is a generally immeasurable consequence.

Regardless of the feelings of Messrs. Albee and Aristotle, their insight begs an investigation: where does construction end and emotion begin? In other words, where is the bridge between the material construction of a play and the emotional effect it compels

in its audience? Where, when, and how does that space between occur? Is it appropriate to say this “space between” is where art happens? Might the effect of this space of emotion be what separates art from functional craftsmanship? Such a notion may appear to wade too far into the waters of metaphysics. However, this impenetrable nature demands our utmost thought and concern. Can the Space Between be wielded to an artist’s advantage?

Aristotle seems to understand that the tools of objectivity – rhythm, melody, length, speech, spectacle – combine to create the major forces of subjectivity – beauty, catharsis, pity, fear, and shattering emotional effect. While Aristotle does not specifically explicate this idea (that things objective merge to create things subjective), his terms of vocabulary indicate a dichotomy between the verifiable world of dramatic construction and the unverifiable realm of how that construction effects the emotional life of its audience. We all see the same play, yet generally our reactions are not identical. I see physical, practical objects onstage, and they do things which give me intangible, ethereal feelings. How does art’s material beginnings create ethereal impact, the result of which is my own emotional experience, conjured from practical clay to make me feel within this Space Between?

A crucial inhabitant of the theatrical Space Between is violence, for violence’s effect in reading cannot be assumed to replicate its effect in performance. The lines indicated by the playwright will be the same, but the performance of violent acts is so at the mercy of the performers’ physical prejudices, that – to a higher degree than many of the other already perpetually-altering aspects of theatre – its visual appearance onstage cannot be predicted by reading the text, even if the moves are specified by the author. Therefore, the emotional effects of violence tend to lie largely outside the reach of the

playwright's initial prescriptions, and it demands special consideration regarding its unique facilities as a feature in play-making.

Violence also constructs its own unique Space Between, where the emotional reaction the playwright seeks from the audience is synergized with the tools at the command of the production team, in an attempt to use tangible effects to create an intangible emotional reaction in an audience. Uniting the playwright's intent with the actor's physical abilities is the vital key to the staging of violence. Not all actors are equal in terms of their dexterity, or their ability to live truthfully in moments of violence. The fight director must work with the director to achieve the desired effect of the playwright, while keeping in mind the performers' limitations. In cases where the actors are unable to achieve perfection, the production's artists must consider how they can engage an audience's imagination so that the story can be articulated, regardless of limitations. Such creative solutions may occur by using tools exterior to the actors' bodies, if the team finds themselves lacking a totally realistic depiction of physical conflict. They must seek to use their design platforms to augment the actors' physicality, in order to compensate for any lack of authenticity. Playing on the audience's senses through additional visual and auricular elements distributes the violence's effects to other theatrical mediums, keeping the author's intentions in mind, while exploiting the art-form's malleability, and not placing the burden solely on the performers to make it "look real."

As any tool in a dramatist's toolkit must, violence serves to move the story forward, to appropriately push the narrative towards its conclusion, and to complement the journey with an experience commensurate to the play's desired effect. Its momentous quality makes it a useful tool in dramatic composition. Even when playwrights toy with the momentous

nature of violence (as we shall see happen in the work of Sarah Kane), the audience's assumption of its life-altering functions remains fiercely at work. If violence's nature is questioned, it is the assumption of horror that is brought under scrutiny, for such expectations begin from a base-level that could be called Violence Is A Thing That Is Bad.

Therefore, my central argument is as follows: the presentation of stage violence exists on a spectrum. In the works of William Shakespeare and Sarah Kane, we see two radically different approaches to the presentation of stage violence, both equally powerful and innovative. Shakespeare uses violence and fighting as an explicitly plot-based tool, often terrifying, but always safely under the blanket of a forward-driving narrative, comprehensible in its use and effect. Kane, on the other hand, pushes her violence outside the realm of the purely narrative, to the point where the audience's personal safety is questioned. Kane's violence encompasses many aspects not found in Shakespeare: it is inexplicable, unfounded, and exists in a realm of perpetual instability; it could arise for no identifiable reason. It subjects the audience to a barrage of horrors in the interest of enlarging their sense of the world's suffering. It is sensory and visual, while Shakespeare's is functional and aural. Shakespeare relishes in cause-and-effect, while Kane dismisses it outright. These two schools of violence place differing demands on the staging of their plays, and it is towards a methodology of understanding what requirements must be brought to play in the production of their respective works that I write this thesis.

To quote Kane herself, "Acts of violence simply happen in life, they don't have a dramatic build-up, and they are horrible" (Bayley, 1). Her plays live by that belief.

In the midst of all others, why Shakespeare and Kane? Because each represents the finest work their particular school has to offer. Each is radically different from the other,

thereby allowing the ends of this violent spectrum to be clearest viewed. No playwright moved their plots along through violence better than Shakespeare, and no dramatist used heightened terrors to more perplexing – though rewarding – effect than Kane. They are the best of two different worlds, or perhaps, the shining two poles of one world.

To be clear, I am not attempting a dissection of violence as a social epidemic; such inquiry lies outside the scope of this study. I am addressing how violence is used in plays, and am interested in the reality of the conflict only insofar as it contributes to our experience of violence as an act happening on a stage. Much scholarship exists on the subject of dramatic violence as a thematic aspect of plays and playwrights' work, treating the violent acts as a jumping-off point for theoretical and academic commentary. In addition, innumerable texts on stage combat exist in the more practical, "how-to" tradition, designed to focus on a purely physical vocabulary for performing the moves necessary to create the illusion of fighting onstage. My work seeks to find a middle-ground, where violence is treated as a dramaturgical tool in the play's construction; not purely theoretical, nor entirely physical. I seek to investigate how we understand violence as wielded by playwrights, and thereby attempt to tangibly create its effects onstage.

Violence in the world of drama is here defined as a combative act or series of actions perpetrated out of cunning or passion for the purposes of doing physical harm to another human, usually with the aim of seeking conflict-resolution through the course of the activity. Theatrical violence almost always has an endgame. Its occurrence may be anticipated but its objective is always crystal-clear. As with songs in musicals, a fight occurs when mere speech is no longer sufficient to addressing the task at hand; therefore, its very appearance should negate the possibility for motivational uncertainty, as its

existence is built on primal inclinations, which should be clear, and easy to explain. The most effective type of stage violence serves as either a crystallization or deepening of character intentions, not as an obfuscation or misdirection of them. The cleanest, most narratively orthodox fights in drama were written by Shakespeare, and the only advice he gives us on staging them is “They Fight.” His stage directions can be so spare because he has already performed the grunt-work of creating tangible characteristic need for the fight; his dramaturgy will be clear regardless of the visual appearance of the moves performed. His use of violence is largely auditory. Regardless of the theatrically combative quality of the actors playing Edgar and Edmund, due to the explicitly informative dialogue Shakespeare has included, there will be no ambiguity on the audience’s part as to who has won and who has lost. The story will be advanced, no matter what moves are performed by the actors. Shakespeare will spell it out for us, as he was wont to do with almost all his plot-points. His violence always serves as a narrative building-block, a domino to push the next one forward. None of his duels or battles function solely as world-building atmosphere. (Vague or unmotivated fighting is a sign of questionable playwriting, or perhaps a hint the play is in development. In such heightened circumstances in which violence occurs, not being able to understand why a fight is happening produces a unique type of viewer-based displeasure. As with a gratuitous sex scene, something about the nature of the material we are seeing makes unnecessary depiction glaringly apparent.)

A distinction must be drawn between fighting and violence. I have used violence as a blanket term, but will never apply ‘fighting’ to what happens in the plays of Sarah Kane. Violence can encompass all acts of physical aggression. Fighting, by contrast, is when two combatants engage in a violent altercation, most often with mutual agreement

upon the course of action, the fighters being trained, and fairly evenly matched in skill. Many plays have violence, fewer have fights. For instance, the Solider sucking out Ian's eyes in *Blasted* could hardly be said to be a 'fight,' nor would it be fair to say that when Tinker cuts off Carl's tongue in *Cleansed* and then forces him to swallow a ring that Carl and Tinker are 'fighting.' The characters here are not trained in any combative discipline, and the violence is far more one-sided: the role of aggressor and victim do not change, whereas in a Shakespearean fight, we may see shifts in which duelist has the upper-hand. Such a fluidity of perpetration is not present in Kane's violence.

While Kane's violent strategies bend towards the curvilinear, Shakespeare's are far more tactile. Regardless of the era of his writing in which the fight occurs, Shakespeare's use of stage-violence retains a degree of commonality, in that it is always something that is built up towards, never something that explodes unexpectedly. Shakespeare always employs a fight as a tool to keep the plot moving. Even in moments of abject horror, such as the gouging-out of Gloucester eyes, the means of violence are never to be wallowed in for their own sake: Gloucester's blinding pushes the story forward by revealing which of his sons had actually betrayed him, providing the means of Cornwall's death (which leads to the affair between Regan and Edmund), and gives Gloucester a circumstance under which he will be unable to recognize Edgar until his virtuous son deems it appropriate to reveal himself (not to mention the Duke's literal blindness contrasts perfectly with Lear's figurative blindness in Act IV, Scene VI, the so-called "weeds scene"). While the Duke's torment is horrifying, the plot keeps moving, and the audience is not allowed to indulge in torture-porn.

How do these two playwrights relate to spectacle? If spectacle is a factor extraneous to the story then it's something neither of these writers employ. Shakespeare's violence is so embedded in the narrative it could just as easily be dubbed 'plot,' in Aristotle's terms. Kane's violence is certainly more optically extraordinary in terms of her content, but the searing quality of her spectacle is absolutely key to the eventual aims of her dramaturgy. Kane is interested in viscerally affecting the audience through her imagery: she is trying to "cause a shock to the anatomy," as Antonin Artaud would say (57), which, once it has shocked us, will ultimately bring about an intellectual response. But those responses will be learned more powerfully if we first experience them physically, rather than acquire them through dryly-spoken dialogue alone. To quote Artaud further: "There can be no spectacle without an element of cruelty...[M]etaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body" (77).

(Under the light of the Artaud's own guide-lines, one would be hard-pressed to find a more successful manifestation of the Theatre of Cruelty than the drama of Sarah Kane. She cut to the quick more effectively in a few plays than Artaud managed to do in a lifetime of practical work.)

In the instances of both writers, the spectacular effects are coming as a result of the intentions of the playwright, and have not been added by the "stage-machinist," though that is who will ultimately produce them (as is true of every facet of playmaking besides its writing). While we can't be certain what plays Aristotle was deriding in making spectacle the "least artistic" of his dramatic elements, no one could accuse our authors of using violence for anything remotely nearing empty pageantry.



Let us take a further look at Shakespeare's violent apparatuses, and what roles they play in his drama.

## THE SHAKESPEARE SCHOOL

In *Romeo and Juliet*, swordfights serve as the story's dominant pillars: an opening brawl to jumpstart Act I, a game-turned-deadly in Act III to supply our point-of-no-return, and finally a duel in Act V to give the protagonist the final push he needs to end it all. Shakespeare frequently uses fights as the emotional finale of his plays, as in *Henry IV Pt. I*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Richard II*, and *Richard III*, and acts of violence (primarily suicide) feature prominently in the finales of *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Troilus & Cressida*, *Julius Caesar*, and *King Lear* (Edmund and Edgar's duel being too far-removed from the play's culmination to serve as the climax). All these examples provide their plays with tangible and observable moments whereby a major plot-gear shifts. While Kane's violence often leaves us puzzled as to whether or not anything can be said to be different, Shakespeare allows us to concretely watch the characters move from Point A to Point B through the story as played out in fighting-form.

Another equally key feature of Shakespeare's construction of violence is whether or not he chooses to show a character's death onstage. A "pure" example of dramatic catharsis achieved through combat would be the fight between Prince Hal and Hotspur at the end of *Henry IV Pt. I*: the entire play has been building up to a climactic encounter between these two men, and through Shakespeare's toying with the audience's feeling of suspense, we have roughly equal hope that either candidate will best the other. And yet, he-who-will-be-Henry V prevails, and the so-called "age of chivalry" ends with the death of Harry Percy. These two "mighty opposites" (as Hamlet refers to Claudius and himself) are perfectly matched, both in wisdom and poetic drive, and our thrill at seeing Hal victorious is tempered by legitimate sadness at the death of "Hotspur of the North" (1181,

859). The finale is emotionally complex yet narratively concrete: this is the fight we've been driving to, and this was always a plausible outcome.

This notion of “fight-as-climax” is subverted in *Macbeth*, where an engagement of steel is present, yet we are not meant to actually see Macduff slay Macbeth (in spite of numerous impious stagings to the contrary). The reasoning seems to be weighted by the revelation immediately beforehand that Macduff was not “born of woman” (born through Caesarean section and thereby excluded from the witches’ prophesy). Therefore, he is the only person capable of besting Macbeth. The choice is weighted on the other end by Shakespeare’s insistence on keeping a modicum of suspense present until the final scene, when Macduff proclaims to Malcolm that Macbeth’s severed head can now be seen hoisted on a pike above the battlements of Dunsinane. Shakespeare thus has his dramaturgical cake and eats it too, by telling us Macbeth cannot win, giving us the excitement of a swordfight, and still drawing out the revelation of who survived as long as possible. The playwright clearly knows the ending will be more satisfying if we DON’T actually see Macbeth die onstage, but find out after our curiosity has been expertly toyed with. (This lack of a visual coup de grace is also mirrored in the death of Lady Macbeth, whose end’s causes we are never certain of, though Malcolm says “’Tis thought” she “by self and violent hands / Took off her life” (1339).)

Shakespeare tweaks a similar device for emotional effect in *Henry VI Pt. I*. Until the final act, Talbot has been a jingoistic blow-hard: proud of his war-mongering, worshipped by shallow royalty, and constantly wrapping himself in the flag for purposes of advancing his agenda of slaughter. However, once he is reunited with his seven-years-estranged son, John, emotional and familial considerations present themselves to Talbot

under a new light. While before he could fight a battle with nary a care in the world for anyone's safety but his own, now he must consider another's well-being, which provides us with his heartbreakingly tender query in the midst of wartime turmoil: "Art thou not weary, John?" (620). The Talbot of the first act could not have asked such a question. John is eventually slain and brought to the mortally-wounded Talbot on a litter, his death unwitnessed, and Talbot's swan-song proceeds over his son's corpse, the audience unsure of who was responsible for either party's final injury. In this case, the presence of physical violence would negate the more important emotional climax that occurs in seeing that Talbot can actually be a human being with real human feelings. Who dealt these two men's fatal blows is of no importance next to the satisfaction of seeing a father and son reunite briefly before their mutual death.

Shakespeare's offstage violence plays an oft-crucial role in the onstage action, as in the death of Macbeth, as well as Timon, whose (probable) suicide serves as his titular play's conclusion, despite being unseen by the audience. In a similar vein, it was quite common for Shakespeare to include an offstage death as an accompaniment to general tragedy come journey's end: Brabantio in *Othello*, Lady Montague in *Romeo and Juliet*, Mistress Quickly in *Henry V*, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*, and perhaps most notably, the fool in *King Lear*. None of these deaths are seen onstage (in several cases we haven't even seen the character in question for a few acts), yet the respective plays all feature a tacked-on-death of a supporting character occurring come Act V.

Such cohesive violence is not a part of Kane's drama, as we shall see.

## THE KANE SCHOOL

Edward Bond, in his essay “On Violence,” speaks eloquently on the non-necessity of violence in real-life, saying:

No one could deny that human beings can be violent. But the argument is about why they are violent. Human violence is contingent not necessary, and occurs in situations that can be identified and prevented. These are situations in which people are at such physical and emotional risk that their life is neither natural nor free. (11)

Such a viewpoint serves as a framing-device through which to view Kane’s drama.

In Shakespeare, the means of death are largely interchangeable: most fight scenes can be equipped with any weapon-set and retain their inherent dramaturgical strength. Coriolanus and Aufidius can fight with broadswords or Bowie knives and we still thrill when Martius proclaims: “I’ll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee / Worse than a promise-breaker” (1404). Such reliance on linguistic power is not necessarily present in Kane’s work, where the visual appearance of the violence plays a larger role than it does in Shakespeare. As the Soldier’s suicide is not verbally discussed in *Blasted*, Kane’s stage direction “The Soldier lies close to Ian, the revolver in his hand. He has blown his own brains out” becomes key in a way Shakespeare’s “They fight” is only functional (50). Based on the attending lines, there is no way we won’t know Hal bested Hotspur; that is not the case in *Blasted*, where the stage directions tell us: “The Soldier grips Ian’s head in his hands. He puts his mouth over one of Ian’s eyes, sucks it out, bites it off, and eats it. He does the same to the other eye” (50). Such information is not available in dialogue, and is only described textually by the playwright. Kane’s violent strategies cannot exist independent of their visuals, and to assume her plays could function with ANY type of

violence is to misunderstand her rejection of cause-and-effect (so strong in Shakespeare) and to ignore the richer sensory power at work in her depiction of atrocities. While it is true many plays stripped of their stage directions would be hollow shells of their textual selves, the difference between Kane and Shakespeare can be seen to shed light on how the former discards all possibility of our seeking solace in the notion that violence can “mean” something, while the latter sees its power to influence the plot in an observable, material way.

Shakespeare treats death as something practical and cause-worthy: in the cases of Hotspur, Talbot, Brutus, and Othello, while we may not agree with the reasons behind their deaths, we can see and appreciate they all greet their ends with dignity and nobility. No such sense of moral refinement is bestowed upon death in Sarah Kane’s plays. We can infer the *Blasted* Solider killed himself because of unimaginable grief at what he has done, both to Ian and others, as well as insatiable rage at the brutalities inflicted upon his wife, but since Kane only shows us the gory consequences of his suicide, unadorned by an ennobling Final Monologue, we are denied the catharsis present in the suicides of Othello, who dies “upon a kiss” in Desdemona’s arms, or Brutus who “killed not [Caesar] with half so good a will.” The ends of these men could perhaps be described as “beautifully sad,” with their choices of suicide appearing to the audience as a decision of righteous virtue. Kane does not permit such a romantic dalliance with death, and often portrays it as far-from-the-worst thing that can happen to a person, compared to the innumerable hardships and traumas her characters must endure. In contrast to living without hands, feet, or tongue, death seems like a blessing.

While this is not the only aspect of her violent dramaturgy, Kane's use of explicit violence is often harder to pin down insofar as it works in a conventional dramatic narrative. While Shakespeare finds power in fighting's ability to change and alter people, Kane's violence often traffics in the sheer meaninglessness of the event: limbs will be removed, tongues extracted, genitalia lopped off and barbecued, and we will still be left with the question: has anything changed at all? This is not to say Kane's violent strategies are careless or arbitrary: on the contrary, their placements and functions cunningly subvert narrative norms by not being placed in ordinarily consequential points in the story, therefore not allowing the audience the traditional catharsis we might expect from such placement. Kane will take events (such as acts of violence) that seem consequential, and yet not put them in structurally momentous places. Instead, as we will see, she will take unexpected threads of narrative and bestow them with uncommon import. Motifs we would not expect to hold such power are given functions of Aristotelean proportions.

First, a look at the narratives into which Kane places her violence.

*Blasted* is a play seen through flashes of lightning: many striking events are present, though to give a traditional synopsis feels inappropriate to the effect the play provides, as Kane does not appear interested in traditional modes of causality. Suffice it to say, *Blasted* takes place in a luxurious Leeds hotel room -- "the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world," as Kane describes it (3). During the course of the play, we are privy to many images. We see a forty-five-year-old man, Ian, and a twenty-one-year-old woman, Cate. Ian drinks gin, writes hack journalism, spouts racial epithets, and smokes like a chimney. Cate has seizures, sucks her thumb, and stutters under pressure. Champagne and English breakfasts are ordered, though no one ever appears at the door when the food

is delivered. Sexual advances are rebuffed. Ian coughs violently. A night passes. We learn that Ian has raped Cate. Cate pulls Ian's own gun on him. Cate bites Ian's penis during fellatio. Cate goes to have a bath. A knock at the door. A Soldier with a sniper's rifle enters, the first new presence to cross the room's threshold. We see the Soldier urinate on the bed, shove his rifle into Ian's rectum, weep as he rapes him, and suck out the journalist's eyes. Time passes. We see the Soldier post-suicide, with his brains on the wall. Cate returns with a baby given to her by a desperate mother, having previously escaped via bathroom window. She leaves to get food. A blind Ian suffers in a fluid time-scape. Ian eats the now-dead baby. He dies, then cruelly lives again. Cate promptly returns with gin, sausage, and blood running down the inside of her legs. Cate and Ian eat the raiment, with Cate feeding the blind man. Rain falls. The play ends.

While *Blasted* is hardly straight-forward, the narrative of *Cleansed* is even less certain. The play consists of twenty scenes all taking place in and around a university. Locations include a mud patch by a perimeter fence, a college green, a sanatorium, the showers, the library, and a peep show. The university appears to be run by the diabolical Tinker, who acts as heroin-dealer and in-house torturer. Subject to his cruelties are Rod and Carl, a gay couple, Robin, an illiterate nineteen-year-old, and Graham, whose heroin overdose sends Grace (the closest thing the play has to a protagonist) on a metaphysical journey into a heart of immense darkness in order to commune with the spirit of her brother. The play includes beating, rape, tongue-extraction, appendage-severing, a hanging, and opens with Tinker injecting heroin into Graham's eye-socket. The play also includes passionate sex, fervent dancing, tender pop-songs, and the recurring image of sunflowers bursting from the earth, serving as a striking visual counterpoint to the terrors witnessed.



Kane herself said the play was inspired by Roland Barthes's quote "Being in love is like being in Auschwitz," and it is not hard to see in Tinker's machinations the institutional evil of a concentration camp, though Kane's dramatic agenda extends beyond explicit references to historical crimes against humanity.

*Phaedra's Love* is likely the most easily graspable of Kane's dramatic plots, as well as her most traditionally linear. It tells the story of Phaedra's illicit love for her step-son, the disgusting-yet-irresistible Hippolytus, in a setting that retains the mythological Greek names while updating the language to a contemporary vernacular. Phaedra's forbidden passion consumes her, while Hippolytus spends his days masturbating, having casual sex, and playing video games. Phaedra's erotic desire for Hippolytus is eventually consummated orally, an exchange in which he transfers his gonorrhoea to her. We later learn Phaedra killed herself, and claimed in her suicide note that Hippolytus raped her. Phaedra's husband then returns from abroad once the masses have learned of his wife's death, and encounters a public demanding the execution of Hippolytus. An angry mob descends on the palace, eventually claiming the lives of all the royalty in a gruesome gore-fest that sees Theseus cutting his own throat after unknowingly raping and murdering his step-daughter, Strophe, and Hippolytus vivisected by his father, breathing his last as a vulture eats his body as the curtain falls (his last words: "If there could have been more moments like this" (103).)

All these plays, to varying degrees, wreak havoc with what is or is not a major plot-point. For instance, in *Blasted*, the most traditionally "trackable" (an ill phrase, a vile phrase) through-line is food: beginning with Ian's gin-guzzling and champagne-ordering, moving through the room-serviced English breakfasts, which then get devoured by the Soldier, who proceeds to suck out Ian's eyes, we witness a devolution of edibles, as Ian's

hunger eventually drives him to the climactic eating of the dead baby, a “Recognition” of cannibalism that is immediately “Reversed” by Cate bringing in liquor and sausage, having been raped to procure her meal. Normally, in a play which deals with such enormous topics as war, rape, racism, and First-World nations’ complicity in the suffering of impoverished parts of the globe, who has food and when would not be the most foundational narrative recurrence. But if one were to find the Freytag’s Pyramid of *Blasted*, food would be the intrusion, the emotional mid-point, and the final crisis.

However, despite the presence of abominations, Kane’s interest lies beyond the sensational. In fact, two major violent acts, Ian’s rape of Cate, and the suicide of the soldier, are not even seen by the audience. Kane seems to be shifting our focus away from areas towards which our attention would normally gravitate, into the direction of places where we might not ordinarily look. She is asking us to view horrors not simply as Things That Are Bad, but as events that demand more thought and scrutiny than we have previously realized. Simply showing us Ian’s rape of Cate would perform the obvious act of disturbing the audience in a familiar yet distancing way: we would see Ian as the abuser, Cate as the victim, and the audience would not be asked to question any assumptions it has about the perpetuation of violence in the world. In fact, as is too-often possible with rape scenes, the audience might find itself entranced by a morbid allure, not questioning the political implications behind what it is viewing, but essentially viewing the rape in the same way they might view a consensual sex scene, and deriving from it the same sensory pleasure (a criticism often aimed at such television programs like *Game of Thrones*, where rape seems included for the viewer’s enjoyment, rather than for any pointed social critique). However, Kane robs us of the possibility of seeing Cate’s rape as anything remotely sexy, but instead

forces us to view Ian, a character we already see as patently awful, raped by another character, the Soldier, whom we also see as awful. Putting these two people in this situation invites us to question what is being asked of our sympathies. No satisfying feeling of empathy can be felt for Ian, as the play has trained us to never feel bad for him, and hating the Soldier for his act feels pointless since he has already confessed to such abhorrent behavior, so that working up our ire for this one committed on this particularly terrible person feels arbitrary. The subversion comes from Kane's stage directions:

*[The Soldier] kisses Ian very tenderly on the lips.*

*They stare at each other.*

**Soldier:** You smell like her. Same cigarettes.

*The Soldier turns Ian over with one hand.*

*He holds the revolver to Ian's head with the other.*

*He pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian's hair.*

*The Soldier is crying his heart out.*

*Ian's face registers pain but he is silent. (49)*

Such a description does not invite the standard pity/hatred ratio we would have expected if we had witnessed Cate being raped by Ian. If anything, our sympathy might sway towards the Soldier, whose dark backstory we actually know more about than Ian's: we recognize him as being a cog in the forces of war, driven to his deeds by the rape and murder of his wife, Col (whose eyes were sucked out by her assailants, as Ian's are by the Soldier). And yet unlike the usual dark sexiness of an irresponsible, ill-conceived rape scene, we derive no pleasure from our sympathy. Our feelings for the Soldier only cause

us to question the sheer brutal non-necessity of the whole affair, and make the revelation that he shot himself (which we find out in the scene directly following) one of dreary inevitability, and not one that can withstand any romantic significance. The fact that Kane can make us both feel somewhat bad for a rapist and yet not allow us any satisfaction from that feeling, while also forcing us to view the act in all its terrifying political implications, is an act of incredible dramaturgical complexity. (Not to mention that this rape occurs within the larger motif of food, and does not in actuality function as the play's climactic finale.)

Echoing the sentiments of the afore-mentioned Bond quote, Kane is not simply asking us to feel bad for an abuser: she is asking us to see this situation as preventable, and ask ourselves what we could do stop such acts in the future. She is not asking us to take a bath in offal. If properly directed, we should come away from *Blasted* stunned by our ability to overcome our usual passivity to witnessing violent crimes. Brecht-like, she is making the familiar strange, arousing our capacity for action, forcing us to make decisions, and making us privy to sufferings that appall us because they are unnecessary (Brecht 37, 71).

A blatant red-herring in *Blasted*, too overt to be neglected, is the moment in scene one when Cate has her first seizure. After initially fainting, then sitting up and laughing hysterically, then collapsing again, Cate, in the throes of her episode, says "Have to tell her...She's in danger," before coming back to her senses (9). In the imaginary version of *Blasted* directed by Wes Craven or John Carpenter, this moment would serve as the first major intrusion of Evil Forces, and we would find in it an obvious implication of the Bad Moon Rising that awaits the characters. And, while bad things certainly do happen to these

characters, the only literal meaning we can assume from Cate's prophesy is that she's referring to herself, which would hardly be a satisfying revelation if we were watching *Blasted II: Return To Hotel Hell*, or some such like. In such a typical horror-movie scenario, this oracular incident would serve as an identifiable trope of the genre, whereby we understand the scary ride we are in for, perhaps by feeling the presence of the supernatural for the first time. However, in *Blasted*, we never meet another female character, and Cate never ends up warning anyone they are in danger. The device would be melodramatic if it were actually followed up with, but Kane deliberately misleads us, by showing a possibly hokey moment of horrific premonition, but then making the event have no correlation to the plot we see unfold.

A subversion of Aristotle's notion of concurrent peripeteia and anagnorisis (and that the best tragedies have the reversal and recognition happen at the same time) is also present in *Phaedra's Love*, when Theseus realizes he has just raped and murdered his step-daughter Strophe, and the act is placed in the meaningfully climactic point in the play. In a different drama, one where we had been introduced to Theseus more than two pages beforehand, or been allowed to see violence as a non-ubiquitous occurrence in these characters' world, we might find ourselves relishing in the disgust of Theseus's horrific act. Under the pen of a lesser playwright, however awful Theseus's acts might be, the sheer emotional power of the post-rape-and-murder discovery of his victim's identity, and his subsequent suicide, might easily be allowed to overpower the horrors inflicted upon Strophe. We might find ourselves caught up in a tide of emotion that inadvertently romanticizes Theseus's deeds. However, Kane robs us of this traditional sense of pleasurable catharsis by stripping the event of any emotional significance. We sense the

presence of a major point-point, but are not allowed to emotionalize it. Kane's dramaturgy demands that Strophe's rape not be presented as a sensational horror, but as a horror made all the more chilling by how pragmatic it appears to the characters onstage. The ability to inadvertently glorify a traumatic moment of sexual violence has been neutralized, a strategy similar to that of *Blasted*.

A similar anti-finale occurs in *Cleansed*, when after an eternity of hearing the torturous Tinker referred to as a doctor, he reveals he is nothing of the kind. Normally such a revelation would feel like a meaningful reversal, and indeed it is the most cogent recurring element Kane includes in the play. Yet, in one of the play's final scenes, when Tinker says "I'm sorry. I'm not really a doctor," another anti-climax occurs (146). This deliberately unsatisfying moment takes place after we have seen Tinker's grisly antics inflicted upon numerous people, thus causing the "twist" to feel both vaguely inevitable and only drably surprising. If the event functions as a perception shift (in Brownstein's sense of the term) it is one that makes the audience feel somewhat pathetic for even being able to lightly entertain the notion of Tinker being a doctor, rather than one that satisfies us with both shock and inevitability. It is a whimper, rather than a bang. This strain is even further complicated because we did in fact hear Tinker say in the play's opening scene that he is "a dealer, nor a doctor" (107). Yet with that line occurring so early in the drama, the repetition of other characters referring to him as a doctor retains its believability as a lie so-oft repeated we forget to remember its falsehood. The juggling act Kane manages to perform with this device is almost unable to be fully articulated, thus revealing how impressive this "Aristotle in negative" (as Fuchs would say) motif truly is.

Back in *Phaedra's Love*, a comparable device is present in the homosexual side of Hippolytus' ravenous and indiscriminate sexual appetite: we first hear Phaedra say there is "nothing gay about" him (66), then hear him discuss several men he's slept with, a thread that culminates in Hippolytus charming the priest performing his final confession into giving him oral sex; an unlikely through-line, but one that features the recognition of Hippolytus' sexual fluidity (with the priest), and then becomes reversed as we then see his father Theseus kiss him on the lips before throwing him to an angry mob to be mutilated and devoured. The thread is carried through to something that feels like a conclusion/revelation, but aside from inferring Hippolytus inherited his sexual tastes from his father, no serious deepening of meaning occurs in the motif. Again, the function of tragedy is present, without any decisive moral judgments being made, and no pleasure derived from the unfolding.

*Phaedra's Love* is the only Kane play which contains an overt hint of violence to come: in scene 3, Strophe says "if anyone were to find out" about Phaedra having an affair with Hippolytus, it would be "the excuse they're all looking for," and the royal family would "be torn apart on the streets" (73). Nonetheless, the thread of Hippolytus' sexuality has already been mentioned at this point in the play, and will continue to occupy more narrative time than any threat of insurrection, thereby maintaining Kane's practice of relegating her violence to a subsumed place in the drama.

(While Kane's other two plays, *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis*, also present unique narrative strategies, their complete lack of tactile stage directions makes the charting of their use of physical violence impossible.)

Unlike Shakespeare, whose placement of stage combat serves to illuminate the moment at hand, crystalize character's intentions, and Move the Plot Forward (according to what Katz would call "jackhammer action" (93)), Kane's directions provide a deepening of the play's sensory landscape, a questioning of the motives that cause the violence, and an emotional brutality stunning in its power, regardless of political implications. Shakespeare's stage directions are practical, while Kane's provide the neural and visceral fabric of her plays.

In the next section, we will look at a number of playwrights whose use of directorial notations fall in between these two contrasting schools, in order to highlight the two ends of our spectrum.



## THE IN-BETWEENERS

With what we have seen so far, perhaps it would be fair to say Shakespeare's stage directions are functional, while Kane's are descriptive without being prescriptive. Kane's lack of prescription can be seen in that while she writes of unspeakable horrors, such as in *Cleansed* when Tinker pushes a pole up Carl's anus, she does not give any practical advice on how to achieve this effect. Some playwrights take active strides to nail down specific physical moves in their text for the actors to perform. In order to best view the two ends of the spectrum upon which Kane and Shakespeare exist, let us take a look at a few dramatists whose use of violence falls somewhere in between the poles of our two titans.

For example, in the stage directions for *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Young Jean Lee dictates what violent moves will be perpetrated upon on the unfortunate lead-character of Korean-American: "Korean 2 grabs Korean-American's head and yanks her forward so that Korean-American's head collides with her knee, then punches her in the face. Then Korean 3 punches Korean-American in the face. Korean-American swings at Korean 1 and misses. Korean 1 kicks Korean-American in the stomach..." and so on for paragraphs (77-78). Here, Lee does not offer the dialogue-based solidity of Shakespeare, nor seek to stage immense atrocities in the vein of Kane: she gives the performers specific moves, and lets those moves speak for themselves in notation-form.

Directions of such an explicit nature are present in an altered way in Thomas Bradshaw's *Fulfillment*, where he instructs the following: "Ted hits [Michael] as hard as he can in the head with a baseball bat. Michael is immediately knocked unconscious. Ted stands over him and hits him over and over in the head with the bat. He also hits him in the legs, everywhere. Ted should hit Michael twenty to twenty-five times. It should seem

extremely excessive” (55). Here, while Bradshaw narrates the action in detail, the primary concern is with the beating feeling “excessive”; the feeling is made more crucial than the precise number of hits. Some of the brutality of Kane is present, and the specifics of the directions make it a far-cry from “They fight.” Though, like Shakespeare, Bradshaw’s violence is also narrative-based, as the actions here are clearly motivated, come home to roost immediately afterward, and are not the result of atmosphere.

A writer who exists halfway between Shakespeare and Kane in terms of his notation of violence is Martin McDonagh, who resembles the Bard insofar as his violent acts appear at narratively certain parts of the play, pushing the story forward clearly and overtly, yet, like Kane, he provides no prescription on how to theatrically realize the torture, dismembering, and beatings which his stories include. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh indicates the following: “Maureen slowly and deliberately takes her mother’s shriveled hand, holds it down on the burning range, and starts slowly pouring some of the hot oil over it, as Mag screams in pain and terror” (66). Such an action has characteristics of Kane, in that the torture is heightened and gruesome, and also of Shakespeare, as this violence is clearly linked to past indications of conflict between these two people, and is totally characteristically motivated by Maureen’s rage at Mag for withholding information from her at this point in the play, not to mention a lifetime of resentment. The shocking and brutal beating of Billy by Babbybobby in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* also shares this marriage of visual egregiousness with storyline-based necessity:

*Bobby slowly walks over to Billy, stops just in front of him and lets a length of lead piping slide down his sleeve into his hand...Bobby raises the pipe...Billy covers up*

*as the pipe scythes down. Blackout, with the sounds of Billy's pained screams and the pipe scything down again and again. (93)*

Under the light of the preceding examples, Edward Bond's infamous baby-stoning scene in *Saved* can be seen to be more violently linked to Shakespeare than the less narrative school of Kane. Even without stage directions and lacking extra-textual indication, the horrors inflicted on the baby in the pram would be quite clear in dialogue form: "Try a pinch...Pull its drawers off...Gob its crutch...Give it a punch...Why don't you clout it?...Couldn't yer break them little fingers easy though?...Smother 'em...Where's all the stones?...Piss on it! Piss on it!...Yer don't get a chance like this everyday..." (76-81). The stoning also serves as the culmination of act one, which distances Bond from the divergent strategies we have seen Kane use to place her violence.

Another relevant notation of violence lies in Tracy Letts' *Superior Donuts*. In the penultimate scene of the play, humble doughnut-shop owner Arthur Przybyszewski takes on Irish-mobster Luther Flynn in hand-to-hand combat. The fight is detailed by Letts as follows:

*The fight is long. And painful. It is sweaty and bloody. The fighters display great ferocity.*

*The fight involves fisticuffs, grappling, wrestling, and found objects. The fight contains gouging, biting, kicking.*

*Arthur and Luther speak very little during the fight. They swear, they grunt, they cry out in pain...*

*The fight goes through phases:*

*The early phase of the fight is somewhat of a surprise for both men...that they are in fact engaged in a fight, that they land blows, that they receive blows.*

*It is apparent in the early phase of the fight that Luther is the superior and more experienced fighter. He is also in better physical condition.*

*The middle phase also holds a surprise for both fighters in that their opponent shows tenacity and resilience.*

*This fight will not be decided easily.*

*By the endgame, both men are bloodied and sweaty, their bodies bent with exhaustion. But ultimately, Arthur prevails, not because of dexterity or muscle, but because of his strength of purpose...and Luther's ulcer. And although Luther will readily recover, Arthur has genuinely hurt him.*

*The fight is over. (82)*

Such a description scores the movement, not by a specific blow-by-blow analysis, but through a tonal consideration of how the fight should feel to the audience. Letts gives fight directors the building-blocks of how the action should progress, but does not resort to dictates like “Arthur squeezes Luther’s fingers in the cash register” or “Luther hits Arthur with a baking sheet.” Letts gives enough of a thematic blueprint to allow the artists to figure out the rest on their own. This description engages with the sensory effects of violence like Kane, but fundamentally ties the fight to the mechanics of the narrative in a Shakespearean style, with Letts ensuring the fight maintains its own dramatic structure, in order to give his climax its desired impact.

In *Disgraced*, Ayad Akhtar takes a similar approach, by describing the intended effect, then warning theatrical practitioners of the dangers of dis-believability:

*All at once, Amir hits Emily in the face. A vicious blow. The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him. He hits her twice more. Maybe a third. In rapid succession. Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment. (In order for the stage violence to seem as real as possible, obscuring it from direct view of the audience might be necessary. For it to unfold with Emily hidden by a couch, for example.)*

(75)

Neither Shakespeare nor Kane explicitly concerned themselves with how the audience viewed their violence from the vantage point of realism, but Akhtar is consciously concerned with the audience not seeing this beating as something that is anything less than totally “real.” Akhtar is not interested in anyone pursuing a “symbolic” representation of Amir’s beating of Emily: this instance of domestic violence must feel “real” in order for Akhtar to achieve his dramatic and social purposes. (Such a dictate could also come out of concern for the physical ability of the actors to perform the beating in a way that doesn’t look fake. Akhtar’s concern could be practical, as well as stylistic.)

A solution such as the one Ivo Van Hove created for the ending of his production of Arthur Miller’s *A View From The Bridge* would be inappropriate for *Disgraced*. In Van Hove’s production, the squabble over a knife that turns deadly for Brooklyn longshoreman Eddie Carbone (played by Mark Strong) became a triumphant aria, the entire cast entwined in a rugby-scrum as blood rained down from Jan Versweyveld’s set, and An D’Huys’ sound design – underscoring the entire production – brought what had been a perpetual simmer to a rapid boil. Here, a moment of naturalistic violence (a man getting stabbed), was given

an elevated treatment, instilling the drama with a conclusion of operatic tragedy. Akhtar clearly is uninterested in such an act of grand metaphorization.

An argument could be made that the practical considerations of Akhtar might be seen in some instances of Shakespeare's offstage violence: the hanging of Cordelia, the beheadings of Macbeth, Cloten, and Jack Cade, as well as the rape and mutilation of Lavinia – all of which are unseen by the audience – could be grouped together as events that are simply too difficult to stage convincingly (throw into the mix Arthur's fall from the castle, the striking of the Antiochus father and daughter by lightening, and Portia swallowing hot coals). However, Shakespeare did not always steer away from gnarly violence onstage, as we see in the blinding of Gloucester, the throat-slitting of Chiron and Demetrius, and the cutting-off of Titus's hand. All the afore-mentioned instances also present unique staging problems, yet are included in the onstage action, not simply mentioned after occurring elsewhere. Therefore, since demandingly theatrical violence is present not only in the works of Shakespeare but also of his contemporaries, it seems wiser to assume Shakespeare's gory presentations were more dramaturgically motivated than solely dictated by practical necessity.

The early modern theatre accommodated some memorably horrific bits of staging, such as the simultaneous stabbing and hanging of Horatio in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Barrabas's perishing in a cauldron of hot oil in *The Jew of Malta*, and the Cardinal's poisoning of Julia by smothering her with an infected Bible in *The Duchess of Malfi*. All these instances paint a portrait of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres as places of more than usual theatrical cunning and ingenuity (truly, is there anything they wouldn't show?). Shakespeare himself didn't hesitate to show a child's murder in *Macbeth*, and severed

heads appear tangibly *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Henry VI Pt. II*. Clearly their facility for action and gore was competent. While my examination of violence is more dramaturgical than historical, Edelman shows how the theatre's double-use as a playing space and fencing arena would have led to a high-standard on the part of spectators for the verisimilitude of the fighting they were witnessing. While the current tradition of the fight director only goes back to the mid-twentieth-century, renaissance actors would have presumably had a common vocabulary for safely staging fights, under the constraints of the brevity of their rehearsal period. The average person's capability in relation to swordplay would have been higher, and their violence simply reflected the facts of their time: their environment encompassed public executions, bear-baiting, floggings, and the appearance of severed heads used as warning against potential offenders. In this light, Renaissance playwrights' depiction of brutality carries as much a sense of real-life horrors as *Blasted* does, with its scrupulous attention to only employing real-life incidents of reported violence, which Kane herself attested to (Rebellato 14). Her choice of violent acts was not born out of a desire to dream up the creepiest events she could think of, but of a careful study of actual crimes committed, making the barbarism in early modern plays just as likely to have been "ripped from the headlines."

If it can be imagined, it's probably happened.

## STAGING HINTS IN SHAKESPEARE AND KANE

While fighting occurs at numerous instances in Shakespeare's work, in places of different weight, consequence, and motivation, his employment is largely monolithic: he is always moving the story forward. This appears true of all the Renaissance dramatists mentioned above as well: regardless of the subjective "quality" of their work, none of them could help but move their plots forward, in all aspects, violence especially. The idea of a non-chronological plot, or a device used only for sensory effect, never seemed to occur to them. They created tales that did not linger or dwell on atmosphere, unless it was in primal pursuit of moving the story towards its end. However, such a uniformity does not mean one cannot observe differences of intention in Shakespeare's fights. In order to find possibilities of differing fight strategies in the Sweet Swan's work, we must look to the map whereby Shakespeare gives us all his hints: his verse.

In *Contested Will*, James Shapiro makes the following observation:

The move to Blackfriars coincided with and may have accelerated what critics have long characterized as Shakespeare's turn to a distinctive later style – though the reasons for the changes in his verse habits cannot simply be attributed to the new venue or the kinds of plays he was writing. I'm as wary of developmental or evolutionary arguments about style as I am about the life stages of Shakespeare's career, but there's no getting around the evidence offered by the plays themselves after 1608 or so. The change in how he composed blank verse marks a watershed, excluding potential candidates such as Oxford who died long before Shakespeare's style took this turn...It feels more like prose than blank verse, an effect in part achieved by abandoning a regular pause or breath at the end of



lines...Shakespeare's verse is now a lot more clipped and elliptical. It's much tougher to follow because he removes syntax, and keeps interrupting speeches (and lengthening them) with parenthetical thoughts or qualifiers. Metaphors spill over one another, and letters, sounds, words, and phrases reecho....[R]hyme is all but banished, in its place far more enjambment and lines that have what's called an extrametrical or eleventh unstressed syllable. (251-252)

In *Playing Shakespeare*, John Barton makes the case that such metric irregularities can be useful to an actor in determining the emotional state of the character: if their verse is messy, perhaps their thought-process is as well. Barton uses the case of Leontes from *The Winter's Tale*, who in his descent into mad jealousy, addresses his son Mamilius thusly: "Gone already! / Inch-thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a fork'd one! / Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I / Play too..." (1572). Here, we have a sentence extending awkwardly into another line of verse, which might give the performer a clue that Shakespeare wants there to be a pause of consideration after Leontes says "Thy mother plays, and I" before venturing into the conclusion of "Play too." Such a choice makes poetic and characteristic sense in terms of Leontes' deteriorating mental state at this point in the story; his jealous paranoia about the imagined affair between Hermione and Polixenes is noticeably shifting the way he expresses himself in iambic form.

Can such an observation, that Shakespeare's new verse style effects the play's emotional impact, and has implications about the intellectual state of the characters, be applied to how Shakespeare wants his late-period fights to be performed? In looking at two confrontations previously mentioned, one from roughly 1597 (*Henry IV Pt. I*) and the other from about 1608 (*Coriolanus*), we shall see what can be gleaned.

Here we have the Hotspur/Hal fight from the first part of *Henry IV*, a sterling example of a play's climax coinciding with a duel:

**HOTSPUR**

If I mistake not, thou art Harry Monmouth. \*

**PRINCE HENRY**

Thou speak'st as if I would deny my name.

**HOTSPUR**

My name is Harry Percy.

**PRINCE HENRY**

Why, then I see \*

A very valiant rebel of the name.

I am the Prince of Wales; and think not, Percy, \*

To share with me in glory any more:

Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere;

Nor can one England brook a double reign,

Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales.

**HOTSPUR**

Nor shall it, Harry; for the hour is come

To end the one of us; and would to God

Thy name in arms were now as great as mine!

**PRINCE HENRY**

I'll make it greater ere I part from thee;

And all the budding honours on thy crest

I'll crop, to make a garland for my head.

**HOTSPUR**

I can no longer brook thy vanities.

*They fight...HOTSPUR is wounded, and falls*

**HOTSPUR**

O, Harry, thou hast robb'd me of my youth!

I better brook the loss of brittle life

Than those proud titles thou hast won of me;

They wound my thoughts worse than thy sword my flesh:

But thought's the slave of life, and life time's fool;

And time, that takes survey of all the world,

Must have a stop. O, I could prophesy,

But that the earthy and cold hand of death

Lies on my tongue: no, Percy, thou art dust

And food for – \*

*Dies*

**PRINCE HENRY**

For worms, brave Percy: fare thee well, great heart! (879-880)

Such an end is both poetically stirring and metrically regular. The only alterations to line-length come in the form of three lines with eleven syllables and Hotspur's dying gasp, "And food for –" (all marked above with asterisks), a painfully short line punctuated by an untimely death. This linguistic clarity is mirrored by the fight scene's narrative function: it is performing the clear and decisive act of bringing together these two "mighty

opposites” to create an exciting and moving finale for the play. One could infer from this pentametered dialogue that the fight between Hotspur and Hal is meant to be bold, sweeping, and ultimately heartbreaking, with both combatants striving their best for victory in a setting both heightened and noble. Each soldier’s cause can be seen as just, as Shakespeare never tells us whether we should believe in Henry IV’s claim to the throne, thereby making Hotspur’s rebellion and Hal’s fight for stability equally plausible. Therefore, we have an ethically ambiguous yet dramatically satisfying end to the saga of the two Harrys, given to us both poetically and physically.

However, Act I, Scene VIII of *Coriolanus* offers little such narrative or metric clarity. Observe:

**MARTIUS**

I'll fight with none but thee; for I do hate thee \*

Worse than a promise-breaker.

**AUFIDIUS**

We hate alike: \*

Not Afric owns a serpent I abhor

More than thy fame and envy. Fix thy foot.

**MARTIUS**

Let the first budger die the other's slave,

And the gods doom him after! \*

**AUFIDIUS**

If I fly, Martius, holla me like a hare. \*

## MARTIUS

Within these three hours, Tullus, \*  
Alone I fought in your Corioles walls,  
And made what work I pleased: 'tis not my blood  
Wherein thou seest me mask'd; for thy revenge  
Wrench up thy power to the highest.

## AUFIDIUS

Wert thou the Hector \*

That was the whip of your bragg'd progeny,  
Thou shouldst not scape me here. \*

*They fight, and certain Volsces come to the aid of AUFIDIUS. MARTIUS fights till  
they be driven in breathless*

Officious, and not valiant, you have shamed me \*  
In your condemned seconds. \* (1404)

Here we have nine lines (over half of the entire scene) that do not adhere to the standard ten-syllable format of iambic pentameter. This fight also does not have a clear victor, nor does it come at a traditionally decisive point in the play. While the battle of Corioles gives Caius Martius his namesake, this particular fight with Aufidius is one of many times they have fought with each other, and it will not be their last interaction. Thus, the implications of this fight are not as clear as that of Hotspur and Hal. These two men also live far less-examined lives than our 1597 friends: both are primarily denizens of war from prominently militaristic cultures, and Coriolanus's notable insensitivity makes him one of the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists (I venture most would rather

spend time with Richard III than with Martius's incessant doctrine of hating the impoverished and ranting about their poor dental hygiene). While the battle of Hal versus Hotspur could be said to be an ennobling example of battle-field engagement, with valiant physical prowess present in both combatants, Shakespeare seems to be indicating the fight between Martius and Aufidius should appear rough, barbaric, dirty, and deliberately unsatisfying, if we are judging by the clues his verse has given us. *Coriolanus* appears to demand a cruder physicalizing of violence than *Henry IV Pt. 1*.

If Shakespeare offers hints on how to effectively stage his violence in his verse, the question begs asking, can any similar clues be found in Kane's writing?

In order to observe our visceral reactions, below is a partial catalogue of stage directions Kane includes in *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, and *Cleansed*, all of which describe acts of violence and aggression.

*-Ian, apparently still in pain, takes her hand and grasps it around his penis, keeping his own hand over the top. Like this, he masturbates until he comes with some genuine pain. He releases Cate's hand and she withdraws it. (15)*

*-On the word 'killer' he comes. As soon as Cate hears the word she bites his penis as hard as she can. Ian's cry of pleasure turns into a scream of pain. He tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth. He hits her and she lets go. Ian lies in pain, unable to speak. Cate spits frantically, trying to get every trace of him out of her mouth. (31)*

*-Cate begins to cough and retch. She puts her finger down her throat and produces a hair. (33)*

*-[The Soldier] stands on the bed and urinates over the pillows. (39)*

*-Ian masturbating...Ian strangling himself with his bare hands...Ian shitting. And then trying to clean it up with newspaper...Ian crying huge bloody tears. He is hugging the Soldier's body for comfort...Ian tears the cross out of the ground, rips up the floor and lifts the baby's body out. He eats the baby. (59-60)*

*-Man 2 holds Hippolytus. Man 1 takes a tie from around a child's neck and puts it around Hippolytus' throat. He strangles Hippolytus, who is kicked by the Women as he chokes into semi-consciousness. Woman 2 produces a knife...Theseus pulls Strophe away from Woman 2 who she is attacking. He rapes her. The crowd watch and cheer. When Theseus has finished he cuts her throat...She dies. Man 1 pulls down Hippolytus' trousers. Woman 2 cuts off his genitals. They are thrown onto the barbecue. The children cheer. A child takes them off the barbecue and throws them at another child, who screams and runs away. Much laughter. Someone retrieves them and they are thrown to a dog. Theseus takes the knife. He cuts Hippolytus from groin to chest. Hippolytus' bowels are torn out and thrown onto the barbecue. He is kicked and stoned and spat on. (100-101)*

*-Theseus cuts his own throat and bleeds to death. (102)*

*-Hippolytus dies. A vulture descends and begins to eat his body. (103)*

*-Carl's trousers are pulled down and a pole is pushed a few inches up his anus. (117)*

*-Carl sticks out his tongue. Tinker produces a large pair of scissors and cuts off Carl's tongue. Carl waves his arms, his mouth open, full of blood, no sound emerging. Tinker takes the ring from Rod's finger and puts it in Carl's mouth...[Carl] swallows the ring. (118)*

*-[Tinker] takes Carl by the arms and cuts off his hands. Tinker leaves. Carl tries to pick up his hands – he can't, he has no hands...The rat begins to eat Carl's right hand. (129-130)*

*-Graham presses his hands onto Grace and her clothes turn red where he touches, blood seeping through. Simultaneously, his own body begins to bleed in the same places. (132)*

*-An electric current is switched on. Grace's body is thrown into rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out. (135)*

*-Tinker grabs Robin's head and forces it down, rubbing his face in his own urine. (141)*

*-Robin takes off his tights...and makes a noose. He gets a chair and stands on it. He attaches a noose to the ceiling and puts his head through...The chair is pulled from under Robin. He struggles...Still choking, Robin holds a hand out to Graham. Graham takes it. Then wraps his arms around Robin's legs and pulls. Robin dies. Graham sits under Robin's swinging feet. (144)*

The impressions one receives simply from reading these directions are undeniably shocking. Indeed, when *Blasted* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 1995, reviews were overwhelmingly negative, with critics dismissing the work as repulsive dreck. One critic, Jack Tinker of the Daily Mail, dubbed it “a disgusting feast of filth.” Amusingly, the most atrocious character in the Kane canon ended up being named ‘Tinker,’ a warning to critics who wind up on the wrong side of history.

When discussing her approach to the demanding stage directions of *Cleansed*, director Katie Mitchell said:



When I read it, as a bit of literature, I see pictures of it as if it were fragments of a film. I imagine immediately someone having their tongue cut out, I imagine immediately someone having their hands chopped off. And I don't think 'Oh, there's a nice ribbon there coming off a wrist in a symbolic way.' I don't think that's quite what the stage direction makes you think, it makes you go 'Fucking hell! Blimey! It's only scene four!'...It's quite hardcore. So I tried to honor the initial sensations and images I had when I first read the material.

Mitchell's reaction implies an organic response to early encounters of the text, and seeks to re-create that initial sensation onstage. Here, Mitchell appears to seek a similar sense of reality as Akhtar strives for in *Disgraced*; a metaphorical, symbolized approach to violence not being something in which she was interested. And indeed, in reading the appalling deeds Kane describes, one could hardly dub Mitchell's approach a distortion of the play's impact. The brutalities do not appear to allow any distance between their intrinsic horror and our experience of that horror; we see and feel them as they are. They seem "as real as possible." If I read a hanging in a Kane play, I feel like I am experiencing a hanging, not a metaphorical representation of a hanging. This is not to say Kane's violence don't encompass thematic metaphor, but that metaphor is found in retrospection. This reader experiences no visual metaphorization of the image in his mind during the immediate act of reading.

Though the author herself appears to have had a different view. In an interview with Dan Rebellato, Kane said:

It's completely impossible to stage *Cleansed* naturalistically because half the audience would die just from sheer grief if you did that play naturalistically...What

I'm writing is the effect and everything...It's not about the actual chop, it's about how that person can no longer express his love with his hands. And what does that mean? And I think the less naturalistically you show those things, the more likely people are to be thinking: "What does this mean? What is the meaning of this act?" Rather than "Fucking hell, how did they do that?" Which is really not that interesting a response to elicit from an audience, because, you know, David Copperfield can do that. (9-10)

Kane brings up a very real possibility in this passage: while Shakespeare's use of violence stayed largely static throughout his career (insofar as he used it as a plot-device) whether in the high tragedies or the so-called apocrypha, maybe Kane's demands of the staging of her violence alter from play to play. While Kane would likely have disagreed with Mitchell's impulses, the larger opportunity of drastically different violent needs from *Blasted* to *Phaedra's Love* to *Cleansed* remains exciting and plausible. While they share many similarities, perhaps each bears its own violent dramaturgy, and the level of representation in *Cleansed* should not equal that of *Blasted*.

Michael Billington said the following of Mitchell's 2016 revival of *Cleansed* at the Royal National Theatre:

Everything in Mitchell's production is clear and explicit. We see Carl's tongue cut out, a pole inserted in his rectum, and his hands and feet brutally mangled. Grace undergoes an operation in which she mutates into her brother with visible genitalia. All this has proved too much for a handful of audience members who have, according to reports, fainted. But I would absolve both the play and the production, in which the sex is as graphic as the violence, of the charge of easy sensationalism.

Kane is ultimately making a moral point about sanctioned butchery. My particular problem is that such relentless exposure to man's inhumanity to man produces a sense of fatigue rather than of horror. (1)

While not having personally seen Mitchell's production, it must surely be agreed upon that one cannot question the world's evils if one has fainted. The sensory-overload will be remembered far more than any analytic response gleaned from the emotional reaction.

Billington's reaction of fatigue is telling. As with simply reading the mounting abominations Kane notates, one could earnestly throw up their hands and ask "Why? Why am I being subjected to this? What good is this representation of monstrosities doing, aside from disturbing me endlessly?" To this I would posit that it is not the moment of violence that merits the utmost consideration, but what is coming later that makes the experience necessary. When staging one of Kane's plays, the artists must determine what about the endgame demands horrors happen along the way. The tender endings of *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, and their surprisingly optimistic belief in the power of love in the face of a life of terror, would lack their emotional impact were they not preceded by exhibits of everything leading us to doubt humanity's capacity for affection. Kane seems to be leading us to an understanding of the power of love through everything that is its opposite. We see the social necessity of love. We see love as a Force which allows us to take on evil and persevere, no matter the gruesome encounters that cross our path.

Another questionable representation of violence in Kane's plays came from Peter A. Campbell, who wrote extensively about his directing choices in his essay "Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*: staging the implacable." Campbell placed monitors onstage to accentuate

certain actions, and to allow acts placed upstage to be viewed with closer scrutiny. This became particularly vital with Campbell's staging of the rape of Strophe. In it, he

transformed the unnamed men and women that Kane calls for in the script into a chorus that helps Theseus rape and murder Strophe...For the rape, Strophe's face was visible on the monitors as Theseus pushed up her dress and forced her over the side of Hippolytus' couch. He then tore off her underwear and began thrusting at her from behind as the audience could see her face in close-up. Theseus thrust for almost a minute before taking the knife in his hand and pulling it across Strophe's throat, again in close up. He then let her head drop onto the side of the couch; it remained on the monitors to the end of the play. (180-181)

While I can't comment on the audience reaction of a production I was not a witness to, it remains very possible to comment on the intentions of a director when they are so explicitly laid-out. While Kane calls for the crowd to "watch and cheer" (101) during Strophe's rape, the direction is general, and non-prescriptive; the cheering could be continuous, occasional, or scarce. Campbell's insistence on cinematizing the act, directing the crowd to aid Theseus in his crime, orchestrating the event to last almost sixty seconds, and forcing the audience view Strophe's face for the rest of the play, seems wholly antithetical to the aims of Kane's violent dramaturgy. As we saw in the earlier examination of this act as an anti-climax, the chilling nature is found in how casually it occurs, how easily the crowd goes along with it, and with how meaningless it feels, not with how sensational it appears. The disturbance comes from how un-disturbed all on stage are by the deed. Amping up the cruelty such to grotesque proportions seems exploitative, rather than thought-provoking, particularly when this is not an event that needs help to be unsettling. Campbell's

tactics feel irresponsible in the *Game of Thrones* style, where we only see rape as an aesthetic experience, not as direct social commentary. Such choices are not only bad drama, but nullify the aim of Kane's genius, whereby we view these atrocities to better understand how unnecessary they are, not to engage with them as something darkly enticing. Campbell's decisions read as pornographic, with erotics take precedent over artistry, and the acts displayed being tacitly endorsed. Campbell is doing what Kane is commenting on.

In the end, the real-world ramifications of what we see onstage provide their greatest import, as our fictions yield a direct mirror by which to view those events in our lives. Stage violence is a uniquely fraught subject, as how it is notated and staged will reverberate with intense volume due to its heightened nature. As we reach our journey's end, let us see what ideas can be gleaned from such a study of our subject.

## CONCLUSION

When concocting a violent play, a playwright could do much worse than take the examples of Kane and Shakespeare into consideration. While their unique geniuses are not imitable, the care and thought each of them display in crafting their violence is worthy of emulation. Shakespeare shows us how, on a base level, your play must never stop moving: even in his most horrific moments, he never allows the action to wallow unnecessarily, and the blood-and-guts are always commensurate to the narrative task at hand (thematic reasons are present in the blinding of Gloucester, the rape of Lavinia, and the murder of Macduff's son, to name some of the most abject instances). Kane shows us how it is possible to put a war onstage and never glorify it for a second. The shocking aberrations at work in her plays (or Shakespeare's) could, in the hands of a lesser dramatist, feel like dirty-laundry-drama, with the playwright airing their neuroses for mere shock-value. Luckily, both writers can back up their heightened antics with graspable dramaturgy, and use their powers only for good.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses the necessity of proliferating images of horrors, saying the following:

To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell, how to moderate hell's flames. Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others...That we are not totally transformed, that we can turn away, turn the page, switch the channel, does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by images. It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer *enough*, when we see these images...Images have been

reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. (114-117)

As we see with our two playwrights, the effect of viewing acts of violence can and should play a role how we relate to those acts in the world at large. The job of staging combat theatrically must be concerned with both the dramatic and the social implications of the violence being enacted, and be certain the events have a firm dramaturgical grounding in at least one – if not both – categories. Staging fights must also be concerned not only with the physical safety of the actors, but with their emotional and mental well-being. Simply because of the dark nature of the material, the enacting of stage combat must never become an excuse for artists to indulge in abusive and harmful exercises of power, as was seen most glaringly in the instance of Chicago's Profiles Theatre, where the barrier between the organizational safety of theatre and actual violence was blurred by the desire of some members of the theatre to eschew considerations of performers' health, in order to make the actions appear as "authentic" as possible. Such reasoning must never be tolerated. If we learn anything from Kane's depiction of cruelties, it is that these happenings are preventable, unnecessary, and designs should be taken to ensure their forestallment. The enacting of Kane's characters requires healthy and analytical intellects on the part of the actors inhabiting them. Kane is not asking her actors to plunge themselves into her disturbing world simply as an aesthetic exercise in order to purify the artists' desire for what Rimbaud called a "a long, boundless, and systematized disorganization of all the senses" (116). Kane's considered playwriting eliminates the possibility of such psychological irresponsibility.

Kane's methodology seems more akin to how Roger Ebert described the films of Luc Bresson, specifically *L'Argent*:

It was [at Cannes] that I saw Bresson's precise, unforgiving *L'Argent*, the summation of his entire career in a film which was so suspicious of passion and emotion, so cold on its surface, that Bresson's whole career came together for me and I finally realized that no man could make such distant and austere films without being, in fact, filled with unlimited passion. (12)

No playwright could write such terrible events without being, in fact, far more concerned with the bettering of humanity than with its demise, and brimming with compassion for the suffering (for no one could term *Blasted* either "distant or "austere"). While Shakespeare is often considered the ultimate humanist, Kane's empathy, what Ebert would call her "unlimited passion," should never be forgotten. Indeed, turning to Kane's own words seems fitting, as she herself declared: "Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity, humour and freedom as you can" (Bayley, 1).

How do the ethical implications of portraying violence onstage merge with the emotional impact created by practical effects, within the synergistic realm I have dubbed the Space Between? Perhaps I have taken it for granted that theatre is an emotion-producing machine, but I scratch my head and wonder why a person would seek out any art-form if not to feel more deeply. "People don't come to rock shows to learn something," Bruce Springsteen says. "They come to be reminded of something they already know and feel deep down in their gut" (236). Perhaps this is true of theatre as well, emotions living in a primal reservoir where only a certain number dwell: we've all felt all of them before, and the purpose of art is to provide us with a hit of those emotions not generally granted in day-to-day existence. This inaccessibility of emotions in our ordinary lives is key to theatre's



existence, for we'd have no need of it if it didn't satisfy our desire for greater feeling and community than daily mundanity. As violence is used in the plays of Shakespeare and Kane, we are allowed to consider, feel, and think about acts which to view in the world-at-large would come at too great a cost to our personal well-being, and are able to view them in a manner that is physically safe and mentally stimulating.

Therefore, the performance of violence must be non-threatening to the performers if it is to enact its social function of allowing the audience to ponder its implications. For the actors to actually be in danger is not something the vast majority of audience members enjoy watching, as it negates the power of the story, and replaces it with practical considerations external to the drama: "Is she okay? That looked too real." Whatever the lessons of the Gladiatorial Games teach us, people no longer go to the theatre to quench their thirst for blood-sport, and the lascivious implications involved in finding viewing-enjoyment from stage-violence are hardly comparable. To attempt to equate fake-fighting with people genuinely killing each other is to misunderstand the satisfaction that comes from KNOWING the violence is fake, that the actor WILL return to perform another show, and the altercation will NOT have any real-life consequences. From these certainties, we derive specific pleasures. And thus, violence onstage must be choreographed and performed in a safe manner if a responsible and productive emotional reaction is to be sought from the spectators. Even in moments when Kane may push the audience towards a feeling of unsafety, such a feeling must be tempered by the greater social implications of the play, and not employed for cheap gratification (for if one feels unsafe, who's to say one isn't?).

Here we have the marriage of ethics and emotion: to produce violent acts upon the stage without the safety of careful construction is to open the door whereby an audience

may be lost from the story, taken out of the moment, and not encouraged to feel and think about the greater implications of the acts they are witnessing. Such implications – if written by a cunning playwright – should be providing pointed commentary and/or serving as a vital cog in the machine of the dramaturgy, not just being included for the negligent and onanistic purposes of aesthetic mood and “artistic” indulgence.

Aristotle said: “we must not demand of Tragedy any and every type of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it” (49). The same can be said of the presentation of stage violence. If a healthy and productive catharsis is to be found in seeing violence theatrically, the strategies conducive to genuinely harming people must not enter an actor’s vocabulary, as it places the actors in palpable danger, and causes the audience to disengage with the drama in a manner antithetical to the theatre’s aims. Ignoring practical considerations of performers’ safety turns the audience into voyeurs of pornography, as the acts onstage cease to be representative, and merely become endorsements of whatever harms are being portrayed. This is a trap into which neither Kane nor Shakespeare – if properly performed – should ever fall.

Here, we have the practical function of the Space Between: the playwright’s motivation merges with the actor’s physical capabilities in a creative way to jog the audience’s imagination and stir within them a feeling equal to the violence’s intended impact. This twinning elevates the violence to an effecting moment, creating an emotional reaction in the audience. If a fight is constructed by considering the performers’ range of motion, and attempting to complement it with a range of artistic supplements in the aim of honoring the reason behind the violence’s inclusion, there’s no telling what could be accomplished, even with actors of a limited physical vocabulary.

We should watch the violent schools of Shakespeare and Kane in order to stir up great feeling in ourselves, and take that impact from the theatre into our daily lives, using the emotion as a jumping-off-point for greater consideration of the world's evil, as Sontag would say. To not stage violence at all would solve nothing, as it would willfully ignore a major facet of the world's troubles. Those whose lives have been touched by violence deserve to have their stories told. And yet, to stage it unsafely is rash on a plethora of levels. We should seek the ethical and emotional reactions that elevate theatre to a worthwhile art-form, and not devolve our practices to the point where we become nothing but dramaturgical pornographers.

Staging violence is a useful and effective tool at a playwright's disposal. Let us seek of its pleasures only those which are proper.

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