Like ghosts we teach a dead religion, build a few more prisons to worship Caesar in, and leave it at that.
Edward Bond¹

We haven’t arrived where we live as long as Shakespeare writes our plays.
Heiner Müller²

There can be no starker alternative – or harsher antidote – to the Shakespearian afterlife concocted by the makers of Shakespeare in Love than Edward Bond’s Lear, which was first produced in London in 1971 (unless, of course, we include in the mix Bond’s later play Bingo, which had its first production in 1973). Though very differently situated, both works are studies in pain: in the social and political pathologies that produce it and the emotional pathologies produced by it. As such, they return us to a period in postwar cultural history when Shakespeare’s status as ‘our contemporary’ was figured very differently than it is today, when a play like King Lear drew to itself correspondences to everything from the Holocaust to philosophical and theological assessments of the absurdity of the human condition and of man’s inhumanity to man. Probably the most prominent manifestation of that moment’s approach to King Lear is the punishing black-and-white austerity of Peter Brook’s 1971 film, which in many ways served to illustrate Jan Kott’s influential assessment of the play as Shakespeare’s Endgame in Shakespeare Our Contemporary (1964).

The popularity of Shakespeare in Love in so many quarters of today’s playgoing and filming going public (even in the scholarly community itself), with its explicit privileging of youthfully romantic plays like Romeo and Juliet and Twelfth Night, and the vogue for fast-paced, high-tech refashionings of tragedies like Hamlet and Titus Andronicus, indicate the need for an historicized assessment of this earlier, comparatively more sombre moment in the Shakespearian afterlife. The postwar cultural and intellectual climate that informed Kott’s and Brook’s existentializing of King Lear, and the Cold War strains and tensions that inform Bond’s decidedly more brutal but avowedly more hopeful politicizing of the play, have all but faded from the consciousness and concerns of Shakespeare’s audiences. Though the world continues to explode with tribal rivalries and religious tensions that have naturalized ethnic-cleansing and indiscriminate acts of terrorism as established forms of political expression, the metaphoric curtain (and materially attendant wall) that divided our houses for some forty years – and that serves as something like an organizing principle in Bond’s play – has also begun to drift out of memory. It is, perhaps, for this reason alone – as a cautionary reminder or warning – that I choose to bring back into focus Edward Bond’s Lear.

Though many have tried, beginning with Nahum Tate’s notorious rewriting of the play’s ending, it is harder to imagine an afterlife for King Lear than it is for any other play in the canon, short of

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Timon of Athens. This is, after all, a play that concludes with an unmediated vision of the afterlife itself—‘Is this the promised end? / Or image of that horror?’—and that leaves no question about the unendurable prospects of enduring in a world shorn of all its bright prospects and illusions. Bond, however, approaches this existential dead-end, amid all the ‘endgame’ obsequies lavished on it by Kott and others in the late sixties, less as an obstacle than as an opportunity to attack the assumptions that had effectively naturalized King Lear’s closing dispensation as an accurate representation of the conditions of existence as they always and ever obtain, regardless of existing social or political arrangements.

Like many British playwrights of his generation (whose number included John Arden, Arnold Wesker, David Storey, and Ann Jellicoe, among others), Bond served his apprenticeship working in the immediate shadow of John Osborne and the so-called ‘angry young men’ and under the broader, joint influence of Beckett and Brecht.

Possibly discerning their incompatibility in a way that other writers and directors of his generation did not (Bond writes at a later date, ‘I don’t like the Absurdist. I am an optimist. I believe in the survival of mankind. I don’t believe in an “Endgame” or “Waiting for Godot”’), Bond takes his stand with Brecht: a position that becomes dramatically pronounced both in his composition of Lear and in the notes, poems, and commentary he composed both before and after its production. He does so, as I contend above, in part to correct a prevailing misrepresentation of history as reflective of a changeless and essentially absurd human condition, but mainly to make a case for the space of human agency and the viability of intervention in history. As Bond writes:

Shakespeare took this character and I wished to correct it so that it would become a viable model for me and, I would like to think, for our society. Shakespeare does not arrive at an answer to the problems of his particular society, and that was the idea of total resignation, accepting what comes, and discovering that a human being can accept an enormous lot and survive it. He can come through the storm. What I want to say is that this model is inadequate now, that it just does not work.

Acceptance is not enough. Anybody can accept. You can go quietly into your gas chamber... Shakespeare had time. He must have thought that in time certain changes would be made. But time has speeded up enormously, and for us, time is running out.

Though Bond makes a strong case here for the pressure imposed by historic contingency (‘You can go quietly into your gas chamber’) on his appropriation of Shakespeare, one could just as well use Bond’s corrective to isolate and exemplify an obvious problem with Bond’s conceptualization of both Shakespeare’s play and Lear itself: a problem solved by the ‘Absurdist’ by reading and reproducing the play as an early modern version of Endgame. Invested as he is in the idea of rationally ordered social change (and in the idea of a ‘rational theatre’ as one of the media of social change), Bond writes in the wake of failed solutions and of revolutions that do no more than reproduce—and often exceed—the depredations of the political orders they seek to supplant. Bond is, of course, keenly aware of our century’s history of failed social experiments and of the horrors perpetrated by governing systems avowedly based on the most scientific principles. Indeed, he stages a version of just such a corrupted revolution in the reign of terror his

3 According to William Gaskill, commenting on two of Bond’s contributions to the Writer’s Group of the Royal Court Theatre in the late fifties, one ‘was rather Beckett-like and the other rather Brecht-like in style’. Quoted in Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, Edward Bond: A Companion to the Plays (London, 1978), p. 8. As John Elsom remarks of this ‘second wave’ of British dramatists: ‘Unlike Osborne, they were surrounded by technical alternatives. They could write in the style of Brecht and no director would quail. They could write Absurdist plays without necessarily being accused of meaningless obscurity... They could write for three basic types of stage—arena, thrust and proscenium—or for no formal stage at all’ (Post-War British Theatre, London, 1976, p. 178).


5 Hay and Roberts, Edward Bond, p. 18.
character Cordelia orchestrates in the second and third acts of his play, and in the renewed urgency she brings to the rebuilding of a wall that earlier served as site and symbol of the divisiveness, and deludedness, of Lear's own political regime. Possibly out of reluctance to give any firm shape to the rational social change he envisions, Bond restricts his identification of a morally reformed and politically refined consciousness to a single, imminently doomed individual. But by having this character (Lear himself) engage at play's end in the solitary labour of digging out a wall he has, himself, first caused to be erected and then die in the attempt, Bond arguably dissipates any hope for the social change he envisions in an all too recognizable image of absurdist futility. In at least one respect, then, Bond's play seems to end in the same conflation of Brecht and Beckett that Bond seemed intent on disavowing and dissolving, and which Alan Sinfield considers (in a telling observation on Brook's 1962 RSC production of King Lear) not only incompatible but 'politically and artistically incoherent'.

Bond, however, claims otherwise in an essay entitled ‘Saving Our Necks’, published in the program notes of the 1975 Liverpool Everyman Theatre's production of Lear, in which he expressly defends Lear's gesture against the charge of absurdism:

My Lear makes a gesture in which he accepts responsibility for his life and commits himself to action . . . My Lear's gesture mustn't be seen as final. That would make the play a part of the theatre of the absurd and that, like perverted science, is a reflection of no-culture. The human condition isn't absurd; it's only our society which is absurd. Lear's very old and has to die anyway. He makes his gesture only to those who are learning to live.

This passage is doubly significant insofar as it communicates Bond's intention to have Lear's closing act of defiance constitute more of a signal or gesture made on behalf of its witnesses (one of whom, cued by Bond's stage-direction, would be prompted to 'look back' on the dead Lear and on his shovel stuck 'upright in the earth' before being hurried along offstage) than an action complete in itself, as well as Bond's claim to possession/ownership of a Lear ('My Lear') that must be held distinct from Shakespeare’s Lear whose 'suffering and partial, ineffective illumination represent the fallible condition of all human goodness'. From this perspective, Bond's Lear clearly points more in the direction of Brecht's Mother Courage — which correspondingly ends with the daughter of Mother Courage beating a drum to warn soldiers in a neighbouring village of an imminent attack — than it does in that of Beckett's Endgame.

Bond's preference for Brecht over Beckett is not, of course, a mere accident of influence. It no doubt followed from Bond's participation in what Alan Sinfield calls 'the rise of Left-culturism' in Great Britain in the sixties and seventies, and from an avowed commitment to political activism and social change that placed him in the vanguard of a

6 It is worth wondering whether Bond's failure to commit himself to a more firmly shaped social or political alternative was affected by the political climate of his times. As John Elsom writes: 'For most of the 1960s, a Labour government was in power, and it was hard for left-wing writers to generate the same degree of self-righteous outrage against (say) the Labour government's tacit support for the American involvement in Vietnam, as had previously been aroused against Suez.' Although, as Elsom remarks, some writers and directors (Elsom specifically names Peter Brook; I would, for obvious reasons, also nominate Bond) 'did their best' to express such outrage, 'left-wing writers [in general] showed a reluctance to attack the Labour Party and government directly, though they might attack a System which somehow existed above, beyond and surrounding the government' (Post-War British Theatre, London, 1976, pp. 179–80). Bond's depiction of Shakespeare's implication in a non-historically-specific 'Goneril-society — with its prisons, work-houses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria and all the rest of it,' in his Introduction to Bingo (Woodstock, n. 1976, p. 7), suggests his working deployment of just such an all-embracing 'System' in Lear as well.

7 Sinfield, 'King Lear versus Lear at Stratford', Critical Quarterly, 24:4 (1982), p. 12. For his part, Perry Nodelman applauds what he takes to be this apparent disparity between Bond's practice as a dramatist and his theoretical aims and intentions. Nodelman construes Lear's act of digging out the wall as 'a personal gesture Lear makes for himself, a stand taken against the wall-building tendencies of all political philosophies — including Edward Bond's' ('Beyond Politics in Bond's Lear', Modern Drama, 35:1 (1980), p. 275).

8 Quoted in Hay and Roberts, Edward Bond, p. 54.

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generation of other politically committed dramatists. Moreover, as John Elsom observes, Brecht not only ‘influenced many British dramatists of the 1960s’, but his influence on the determination of the content and style of British theatre arguably ‘made him the most dominant single personality to affect drama since the decline of Shaw’. Apart from their obvious political affinities, possibly the most prominent sign of Brecht’s influence on Bond is the latter’s responsiveness to Brecht’s development of what was, for all rights and purposes, a highly innovative way of writing dialogue that synthesized colloquialism and an unusual plainness of address with an insidiously effective parody/imitation of bureaucratic jargon or ‘officialese’. Elsom writes that ‘[t]he suppleness with which Brecht used his new proletarian language, with its prim exactness, its slang, deliberate roughness and officialese, fascinated his disciples and caught on with his public in Germany. But it also caused problems in Britain’ where playwrights found it difficult to reproduce the ‘estrangement’ (or alienation) effect achieved by ‘Brecht’s verbal style’. He adds that ‘[l]acking Brecht’s language, British actors had to work towards “estrangement” by other means, often contorted and unnecessary ones’. For his part, the arguably ‘contorted’ means Bond employed to supplement the ‘pointed, austere and polished language’ he managed to shape in a more effective manner than did Brecht’s other British disciples, was ‘his use of violent images’ and penchant for ‘building his political cases from extreme examples’, both of which are put on prominent and provocative display in Lear, to which we must now turn.

Before beginning an examination of representative sections of the play itself, it would be useful to provide a brief summary of how Bond’s Lear differentiates itself from Shakespeare’s tragedy. Bond’s play is set in an unspecific space and time but at a slight evolutionary remove from the feudal order of Shakespeare’s play in which radical political change was effected by abdication or usurpation. In Bond, Lear’s enemies, the Duke of Cornwall and Duke of North, respectively, against whom Lear has built and defended his wall. Lear soon finds himself at war with his daughters and their husbands and, in short order, is defeated and made a refugee. Bond’s Cordelia is a woman whose husband (identified simply as the Gravedigger’s Boy) gives the outcast Lear temporary haven and who is subsequently raped and widowed onstage by an act of officially sanctioned state terror. Prompted in part by motives of vengeance to take up arms against the daughters and their armies, Cordelia and her consort, John, soon assume the roles of no-nonsense revolutionary ideologues who successively subdue the daughters and initiate their own reign of terror whose site and symbol is the rebuilt wall.

Almost all the other characters from Shakespeare’s play are excluded from Bond’s script – most notably the Gloucester family and Kent – though several residually survive in the form of new characters who may be said to distill them. The Gravedigger’s Boy, for example, maintains after his murder a ghostly presence in companionship with Lear that recalls Edgar in his guise as Poor Tom, while the character Warrington, a composite of Gloucester and Kent, is made to suffer much the same kind of vengeful, arbitrary violence at the hands of Lear’s daughters as Gloucester does in King Lear. Bond reserves for Lear the burden of having his eyes surgically removed (as opposed to having them more spontaneously gouged out) which may be said to exceed in brutality what is generally considered the most horrific moment in Shakespeare’s play, but for reasons that are different than some have assumed. Bond’s dramatic disposition of Warrington, which leads on to the brutal treatment lavished on Lear, may provide us with a convenient bridge back to a consideration of the claims made against, and on behalf of, Bond’s construction of violence in his play.

12 Elsom, Post-War British Theatre, p. 117.
13 Elsom, Post-War British Theatre, pp. 188, 191.
After having his tongue cut out offstage, and suffering a savage beating at the hands of Fontanelle and a casually officious torturer named Soldier A (‘Yer wan ’im done in a fancy way? . . . I once ’ad t’ cut a throat for some ladies t’ see once’ (Lear, 2.4/13)), Warrington is treated to the following indignity before being let loose and allowed to ‘flap round the battlefield’: BODICE . . . He can’t talk or write, but he’s cunning – he’ll find some way of telling his lies. We must shut him up inside himself. (She pokes the needles into Warrington’s ears.) I’ll just jog these in and out a little. Doodee, doodee, doodee, doo.

Critical commentary on Lear has fastened less on Bond’s effort to remake King Lear as a highly charged political parable for his time than on its prominent trafficking in violent effects. As Stanley Wells observed of a 1982 production of Lear: ‘What with rape, mutilation, ghosts and mental tortures, this might well seem more like Titus Andronicus than King Lear’. Although I acknowledge the validity of the comparison to Titus, I think Bond’s orchestration of violent acts and effects in Lear is considerably more complicated than Wells allows, and operates more to ‘shock us out of a casual acceptance of violence’ than to invite us to revel in it. (It is, in passing, hard to see how Cornwall’s ‘Out, vile jelly! / Where is thy lustre now?’ [3.7.81–2]) and unusual use of his boot in King Lear are less objectionable than Bodice’s use of words like ‘flap’ and ‘jog’ and unusual use of her needles in Lear.) Indeed, apart from Bond’s depiction of Bodice’s infantilized delight in poking her knitting needles through Warrington’s ears, which has its own dramatic logic however repellent or excessive we may find it, Bond’s crafting of violent effects in Lear is not only dramatically coherent, but adheres closely to the grain of the extra-dramatic points he is trying to make. The scenes of violence in Bond’s Lear, particularly those of Act 2 which record the executions of Bodice and Fontanelle, the autopsy of Fontanelle, and the ‘scientific’ removal of Lear’s eyes, operate both as graphic manifestations of modern state-sponsored violence and as purposeful efforts to bring Bond’s playgoers into direct contact with scenes of their most studied avoidance.

What Bond most wants to address and correct is the assumed exceptionality of this kind of violence: the idea that it wildly deviates from established structures of normative behavior and that some over-arching standard of humaneness must always qualify or hover over scenes of inhuman brutality. As he famously writes in the ‘Author’s Preface’ to Lear:

I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society, and if we do not stop being violent we have no future. People who do not want writers to write about violence want to stop them writing about us and our time. It would be immoral not to write about violence.

(Lear, p. lvii)

At the same time, Bond wants to claim that the normative itself is the product of an informing set of social and political conditions that effectively enables or precludes specific kinds of behaviour. While it is no doubt the glee and studied callousness of Bodice’s behaviour, and the cold officiousness of the character (hereafter called the Fourth Prisoner or ‘prison doctor’) who surgically removes Lear’s eyes, that will most disturb playgoers, Bond calculatively stages these scenes in the absence of any visible or viable indication or indicator of on-stage resistance. In so doing, he takes direct aim at a much-noted moment in Shakespeare’s play when a servant of Cornwall’s verbally objects to, and physically intervenes in, Cornwall’s blinding of Gloucester. While the servant’s resistance arguably supplies a surrogate form of humane agency for an audience otherwise compelled passively to submit to an intolerable action, Bond considers this act of surrogation false to the picture of power

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15 Elsom, Post-War British Theatre, p. 188. As Elsom goes on to remark, Bond’s ‘violent scenes provoked two contrasting reactions [in Bond’s original audiences]: one was that Bond simply likes blood . . . and the other was that Bond hated cruelty so much that he was determined to bring home to his audiences the full horror of it’ (pp. 188–9). It is the latter view that ‘I happen to share’ with Elsom.
relations Shakespeare has put into play. As Bond writes:

In [Shakespeare's] Lear there's the very telling scene where the servant kills one of the dukes who is putting out Gloucester's eyes. Servants don't do that – that's a feudal myth he's going back to. [Shakespeare] wants very much to believe that sort of thing, and it's not true. If the man's paid to stand by, he will stand by – there's nothing else he can do.16

Bond's quarrel with Shakespeare turns mainly on Bond's own privileging of what human nature is or is not capable of within the terms of a feudal reality (as opposed to feudal myth), and suggests that in his effort to 'de-mythify' Shakespeare, he may well be applying an article of faith in social determinism that contradicts his well-advertised commitment to the intervention of individual agency. After all, one can imagine (and Shakespeare surely did) even the lowest subordinate acting against his own best interest to satisfy what he takes to be a higher or prior obligation (though, writing as he was in the long shadow of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, and in more immediate relation to Cold War orthodoxies and the perpetration of atrocities in Vietnam by avowedly God-fearing young men, it might have been more difficult for Bond to imagine this).17

But what mainly drives Bond in his own play is the refusal to provide the audience with any easy access to escape or relief from the sense of guilt or responsibility it might experience at having effectively allowed these, or similar, actions to occur. As Bond writes in 'To the Audience', a poem composed as one of his working papers during his drafting of Lear:

You sit and watch the stage
Your back is turned –
To what?
The firing squad
Shoots in the back of the neck
Whole nations have been caught
Looking the wrong way
I want to remind you
Of what you forgot to see

On the way here
To listen to what
You were too busy to hear
To ask you to believe
What you were too ashamed to admit
If what you see on the stage displeases
You run away
Lucky audience!
Is there no innocence in chains
In the world you run to?
No child starving
Because your world's too weak
And all the rich too poor
To feed it?

On the stage actors talk of life and imitate death
You must solve their problems in your life
I remind you
They show future deaths18

Writing in tune with the contemporaneous penchant of his fellow dramatists to confront or, even, offend the audience, Bond seeks, in this poem, to theorize a dramatic practice that is designed to put the audience itself on trial for its sins of omission and crimes of silence, and to have it acknowledge the quiet violence of its characteristic obliviousness and neglect.19 Where Shakespeare enables playgoers to feel that they have, in fact, mounted a form of vicarious resistance against Regan and Cornwall through the medium of the defiant servant, Bond wants playgoers to witness and recognize their own cowed permissiveness and passivity in the unresisting matter-of-factness of characters who willingly act out their roles as torturers.

17 Richard Strier persuasively claims, in Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts (Berkeley and London, 1995), that this is exactly what Shakespeare is doing in this scene. Strier identifies the servant's resistance to Cornwall as 'the clearest articulation and most extreme case in the play of the paradox of service through resistance' (p. 194).
19 For a wide-ranging account of this phenomenon, see Peter Davison, Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England (Totowa, NJ, 1982), pp. 128–51.
The poem and the crescendo of violent acts in Lear’s second act that starts with Fontanelle’s assassination and subsequent evisceration, and concludes with Lear’s blinding, indicate that Bond sees such scenes as an opportunity to bring inside the theatre what the audience chooses to avoid seeing outside it, not, I would submit, merely to offend them but to confront them with the consequences of their presumed indifference. And, as noted above, there is in Bond’s conceptualization of a passively permissive audience more than a residual shadow cast by the comparatively recent history of the unresisting and, in many cases, willing collaboration of ‘good Germans’ in the Final Solution and of ‘good Europeans’ in the successive subjugations of Eastern Europe by Hitler and Stalin (‘Whole nations have been caught / Looking the wrong way’).

These ‘ghosts of history’ are given a different form of embodiment onstage in the character of the Gravedigger’s Boy who ‘survives’ his own murder in part to dramatize the personal costs of the overarching, and continuous, social catastrophe that Bond’s play dramatizes. A composite Edgar/Poor Tom figure, the Gravedigger’s Boy affiliates himself with Lear after his death and maintains a fawning, childlike dependency relationship with him thereafter that models the kind of relationship Shakespeare’s Lear would have liked to maintain with Cordelia. The Boy effectively operates as the sentimentally charged ghost of suffering humanity of Shakespeare’s King Lear, as the affective locus of that play’s history or afterlife, as well as of history itself insofar as history, as heretofore constructed, constitutes a sentimental education in human pain and endurance.

The ghost of the Gravedigger’s Boy first appears to Lear in the cell to which he is initially consigned by his daughters, and finds Lear in a disoriented state of mind in which Lear responds favourably to the Boy’s claim that he can ‘fetch’ Lear’s daughters ‘here’ (2.2/38). However, the daughters that the Boy summons are themselves ‘ghosts’ of the Lear family history, not the daughters as they are now but as they once were, or might have been, when Lear’s was the law of the land:

**Fontanelle** Do my hair...Father comes home today.  
**Bodice** I must put on my dress.  
**Fontanelle** O you dress so quickly! Do my hair.  
(bodice attends to her hair.)  
**Lear** My daughters!  
**Bodice** They’re burying soldiers in the churchyard.  
Father’s brought the coffins on carts. The palls are covered with snow... (2.2/38)

In a revealing convergence of past and present, the ghosts of his daughters past provide Lear with an education in the damaging consequences of the schooling in the normalization of pain he has given them. This education, in turn, leads Lear to a revelation that is rooted in King Lear’s powerful jeremiads (‘None does offend, I say, none’), but that also operates as a site-specific response to the European postwar dispensation – ‘We won’t chain ourselves to the dead, or send our children to school in the graveyard. The torturers and ministers and priests will lose their office. And we’ll pass each other in the street without shuddering at what we’ve done to each other’ – that becomes positively Blakean as it proceeds: ‘The animal will slip out of its cage, and lie in the fields, and run by the river, and groom itself in the sun, and sleep in its hole from night to morning’ (2.2/40).

This utopian resolve, however, dissolves as soon as the ghosts of the daughters depart, leaving Lear alone with their surrogate, the Gravedigger’s Boy, with whom he achieves a more modest (and residually Shakespearian) embrace of humanity: ‘Here. I’ll hold you. We’ll help each other. Cry while I sleep, and I’ll cry and watch while you sleep. We’ll take turns’ (2.2/42). The later, second killing of the ‘ghost’ of the Gravedigger’s Boy, whose body has been rapidly deteriorating at any rate, significantly occurs at a moment in the play when Lear has rejected this consolation of mutual dependency in favour of engaging in the kind of direct action discussed earlier. Although Lear’s decision to dig out the rebuilt wall soon makes a ghost of him as well, it also reconfigures what we recall of him and how we recall it. The terminal demise of the Gravedigger’s Boy, and Lear’s rejection of a sentimentalized attachment to him as a desired destination, effectively
frees Lear to pursue an alternative provoked but not ghosted by history, to move into a position of dignity and defiance (of dignity via defiance) as opposed to one of calmness and acceptance.\textsuperscript{20} As Bond writes in ‘The Activists Papers’:

Shakespeare says that Lear’s suffering and partial, ineffective illumination represent the fallible condition of all human goodness. The problem is seen to be political but the solution given isn’t – it recommends calmness and acceptance. Shakespeare tries to give the public problem a private solution. Lear finds his own peace and dies. This means that he finally relates to the audience in the way all characters in bourgeois theatre relate to it. He’s an individual with buttons on his jacket who resolves an epic problem – in a private way. This sort of drama was still possible when Shakespeare wrote.\textsuperscript{21}

‘This sort of drama was still possible when Shakespeare wrote’, but is not, Bond implies, for those of us who live in the wake of world-historical events like those Bond repeatedly evokes in the concentration-camp atmosphere of the prison where both of Lear’s daughter’s are murdered, one is eviscerated, and Lear himself is blinded by a would-be Joseph Mengele. Or so Bond indicates both in Lear and in other places like his programme notes to the 1975 production where he writes that ‘We have to have a culture . . . that isn’t a way of learning how to endure our problems – but a way of solving them’.\textsuperscript{22}

Bond is doing considerably more here than quibbling with Shakespeare’s dramatic choices, which do not, in any event, land entirely on the side of ‘calmness and acceptance’ as the servant’s resistance to Cornwall and King Lear’s physical struggle to defend Cordelia plainly indicate. He is also doing more than mere Shakespeare-bashing, as his choice of subject matter alone should suggest. Like Heiner Müller, he is explicitly recognizing that ‘We haven’t arrived where we live as long as Shakespeare is writing our plays’, unless, that is, we firmly believe that the privately negotiated solutions to political problems at the beginning of the seventeenth century can be so generalized as to speak to the problems that beset us today or, more specifically, to the problems Bond was specifically addressing at Lear’s moment of production. But how do we ‘arrive where we live’, how do we arrive at ourselves, if we continue to employ Shakespeare as our dramatic medium? In the following passage, Alan Sinfield incisively restates the logic that often informs the thinking behind contemporary productions of King Lear.

Since King Lear is a great play . . . it must speak to our condition. And if our condition seems to involve brutally destructive political systems and profound inner compulsions which threaten a general apocalypse, then the play must be seen to address such issues. The text as we have received it tends to encourage certain ways of seeing the world and to inhibit others and does not, of course, envisage modern society. Therefore the play and current concerns must, by one means or another, be brought into line.\textsuperscript{23}

As Sinfield goes on to observe, the play is more often than not ‘brought into line’ by cutting, changes of emphasis in characterization or line readings, re-settings of time and place, etc., all pursued in the effort to ‘make it work’. By way of contrast, he remarks that ‘If, instead, the company reworked the play explicitly, the interpretation would lose the apparent authority of Shakespeare, and Shakespeare’s apparently conservative oeuvre would lose the apparent authority of speaking to all conditions.’ He concludes that ‘This is the great collusion in which most productions of Shakespeare have become involved. The shuffles commonly conducted maintain both these dubious authorities, and more adventurous treatments – like Bond’s and Charles Marowitz’s – become objects of suspicion.’\textsuperscript{24}

The crucial word here is ‘authority’. Do ‘more adventurous treatments’ of Shakespeare by writers

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} In a rather brilliant term paper on this subject, a student of mine, Tyler Ault, contends that the ghost of the Gravedigger’s Boy ‘represents social morality’s grip on Lear’ and is, in the end, ‘revealed as the thing that must die’ so that Lear’s reformed consciousness may live.}


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} Hay and Roberts, Edward Bond, p. 53.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23} Sinfield, ‘King Lear versus Lear’, p. 12.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Sinfield, ‘King Lear versus Lear’, p. 13.}
like Bond necessarily lack the authority of Shakespeare? Don’t they continue to feed off it either to their benefit or detriment? Alternatively, might there be more at stake than authority in choosing to model one’s play on so influential a precedent? Do even the most radical departures from the Shakespearean original not keep us stuck in the same circle of meaning and reference? If so, why does Bond choose to remake/renovate King Lear in the first place? What is gained, what is lost, in the process?

As Sinfield elsewhere observes, Lear is one of several examples of the reworking of Shakespearean texts that are consistent with Jonathan Dollimore’s notion of ‘creative vandalism’. As described by Sinfield, creative vandalism involves ‘blatantly reworking the authoritative text so that it is forced to yield, against the grain, explicitly oppositional kinds of understanding’. But oppositional to what or to whom? In a provocative interview with Howard Davies prior to his production of Bingo at The Other Place in November 1976, Bond observes that Shakespeare

is not God and that he is not somebody who provides a total blueprint for the way people should live. What is dangerous about him is that he is such a good artist, of course. I mean, the Germans don’t have this hang-up about Goethe, because Goethe is not such a good artist as Shakespeare by any means and so they are able to arrive at some sort of judgment about him. You know, we think that two people went up to the mountain and got things written on tablets, one was Moses and the other one was Shakespeare. He’s the sort of great idol of the humanist West or whatever, and it’s not true. As a guide to conduct, or to attitudes to work, he’s not so good for us. I object to the idea of him being for all ages in that particular sense.

Bond’s point here is considerably more subtle and suggestive than it may appear at first blush. Unlike critics of the last twenty years who are committed to the wholesale debunking of ‘the Shakespeare myth’, Bond is not specifically concerned with the idea that Shakespeare’s work has been so thoroughly appropriated by the British political/cultural establishment (imperial and domestic) that his influence must be held to be suspect, if not downright pernicious. Rather, he contends that Shakespeare’s artistry is ‘dangerous’ only in so far as it lends a spurious authority to the idea that the plays continue to provide ‘a guide to conduct’ or ‘blueprint for human behavior’. Bond’s quarrel with Shakespeare fastens on the tendency to confuse the quality of the art with the variety of behaviour the art would appear to advocate or encourage. While the one may well be as transcendent as bardolaters claim it is, the other remains profoundly tied to its place and moment of production. As Heiner Müller suggestively observes, ‘Shakespeare is a mirror through the ages, our hope a world that he doesn’t reflect anymore’.

A Shakespeare for our time must, by extension, be redirected, deployed in a manner that offers different guides to conduct and blueprints for behaviour than served in his own time. In both Lear and Bingo, Bond effectively applies this kind of presentist understanding of what was personally at stake for Shakespeare in his composition of King Lear, and explores the implications of positions taken by Shakespeare’s Lear to actions allegedly taken by Shakespeare himself. But in so doing he seeks to hold Shakespeare accountable for the positions he takes less to redress him for his failures than to establish the necessity of such accountability today. As Bond states during the same conversation with Davies, in a comment prompted by a question regarding Shakespeare’s suicide at the end of Bingo, Shakespeare had

written this play about Lear, who went mad on the heath, and standing on the heath insisted on certain moral insights, certain moral priorities for conduct, and you did those things even if it meant your death and even if

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25 I raise (and explore) this same question with specific application to Aimé Césaire’s Une Tempête in my book, Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations (London, 1999). My second chapter, ‘Shakespeare at Hull House: Jane Addams’s “A Modern Lear” and the 1894 Pullman Strike’, may also be of interest to students of the King Lear afterlife.


28 ‘Shakespeare a Departure’, pp. 100–1.
it meant the destruction of your family. You did these things because there is no other life that is bearable. For Lear. And Shakespeare must have known that, otherwise he couldn’t have written the play. That’s what Shakespeare wanted, you know, otherwise you don’t invent somebody like Lear as a fantasy, do you? You’re saying something essential about what you demand and what you insist on, as the price or cost... for being on this earth.²⁹

And as Elsom writes of Bond’s treatment of Shakespeare in Bingo: ‘Bond’s argument is an extreme extension of that voiced by Brecht; that private virtue, private heroism, private morality is not enough: even Shakespeare was corrupt because he lived in a corrupt society... Only political action to change that society is worth considering’.³⁰

It is for such reasons among others that Bond stages what is arguably the most unsettling scene in Lear, that is, the sequence wherein Lear plays witness to the ‘little autopsy’ the opportunistic Fourth Prisoner performs on the body of Fontanelle. This scene (which effectively revisits Lear’s earlier reunion with the ghosts of his daughters past) bears reproducing in some detail:

LEAR Is that my daughter...? (Points.) That’s...? FOURTH PRISONER The stomach. LEAR (points) That? FOURTH PRISONER The lungs. You can see how she died. The bullet track goes through the lady’s lungs. LEAR But where is the... She was cruel and angry and hard... FOURTH PRISONER (points) The womb. LEAR So much blood and bits and pieces packed in with all that care. Where is the... where...? FOURTH PRISONER What is the question? LEAR Where is the beast? The blood is as still as a lake. Where...? Where...? FOURTH PRISONER (to soldier)O What’s the man asking? (No response.) LEAR She sleeps inside like a lion and a lamb and a child. The things are so beautiful. I am astonished. I have never seen anything so beautiful. If I had known she was so beautiful... Her body was made by the hand of a child, so sure and nothing unclean... If I had known this beauty and patience and care, how I would have loved her.

The ghost starts to cry but remains perfectly still.
Did I make this – and destroy it? (2.6/59)

Two different kinds of materialism are in competition here: the cold, technical materialism of the self-styled prison doctor whose interest in the body is purely functional (he wants to know how it died), and the aroused moral materialism of Lear who starts out wanting to know where in her physical being the evil of Fontanelle can be found, but ends up locating the source of her misdirected life in his own actions. Though it was clearly a bullet that undid what Lear now discerns as Fontanelle’s glorious creation, a prior cause has brought Lear into this one-sided reunion with what was Fontanelle around this table. With a logic that sustains Bond’s play, and its difference from Shakespeare’s, throughout, Lear discovers that there is no beast within, only beastly behaviours that mar the beauty of creation for which he now finds himself accountable.³¹

Possibly to disrupt this moving and oddly idealized encounter with his daughter, Bond next has Lear put his hands into FONTANELLE and [bring] them out covered with dark blood and smeared with viscera (stage-direction) as he announces:

Look! I killed her! Her blood is on my hands! Destroyer! Murderer! And now I must begin again. I must walk through my life, step after step, I must walk in weariness and bitterness, I must become a child, hungry and stripped and shivering in blood, I must open my eyes and see. (2.6/61)

Within the brutal economy of Bond’s production, this bloody prospect is but prelude to his staging of a second daughter’s execution and Lear’s own

²⁹ Hay and Roberts, Edward Bond, p. 59.
³⁰ Elsom Post-War British Theatre, p. 190.
³¹ Perry Nodelman cogently, but differently, contends that ‘Lear understands [here] what he did not understand all along – that the world as it is and the people in it are more wonderful than anything one might make them.’ In ‘Beyond Politics in Bond’s Lear’, Modern Drama, 23 (1980), p. 274.
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blinding. But if Bond’s staging suffers from a commitment to excess that brings Lear back into the circuit of reference to Titus Andronicus, it has the virtue of immersing Lear himself in the viscera of a pained moral accountability that cannot be easily mystified or sublimed away, and of doing much the same to his audience. And this, I take it, is how Bond brings King Lear back into the circuit of ‘where we live’, or, more accurately, where we lived when the prospect of going ‘quietly into your gas chamber’ was considerably more vivid than it is today.