

BONDED SHAKESPEARE

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Abstract: To study Shakespeare's following as a literary influence in the world is next to impossible, due to the immense number of writings, in countless languages, published in the past four-hundred years. As the title suggests, this paper refers to an intriguing twentieth-century British playwright, Edward Bond, who proposes two Shakespeare-related plays, *Lear* (1971) and *Bingo* (1973), where the great Renaissance bard is not only radically transformed, but also drastically diminished: *King Lear* is re-written in *Lear* as a systematic and hostile critique of Shakespeare's masterpiece, full of violence, cruelty, aggressiveness..., and "extravagance that is both boring and repellent"; *Bingo*, in its turn, proposes a revisionist portrait of Shakespeare as a man (in his final days) and an author, a denunciation of the great dramatist by an ideologically motivated Marxist-socialist-Brechtian writer.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Bond, Lear, re-write, Marxism, Brecht

In the past four hundred years "William Shakespeare" has become the greatest literary-cultural phenomenon of all times: his work has been translated into practically all the languages of the globe /sic!/: his plays have not only been staged in numberless theaters, but were also re-written, adapted, imitated, parodied, turned into operas or ballets, films, cartoons and TV series, or accompanied by illustrations and interpreted in paintings and drawings of all kinds; millions of essays, research papers, PhD dissertations, book-length critical studies and conference proceedings volumes have been published in hundreds of languages; hundreds of thousands of actors have become—or have dreamt of becoming—Hamlet or Lady Macbeth, Falstaff or Juliet, Lear or Rosalind...; and, closer to our purposes here, countless scholarly and fictional biographies have been written, side by side with new ways of "transforming" his great plays.

No wonder then that in 1998 noted Yale critic and professor Harold Bloom published a 750-page book titled *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* in which he "reminds" his readers that the *Complete Works* represents a secular scripture from which we derive much of our language, our psychology, and our mythology; particularly through his characters (Hamlet, Falstaff, Rosalind, Iago, Edmund, Cleopatra, Lear, Juliet...) Shakespeare invented something that hadn't existed before (so one could think of a world before and after Shakespeare)—he "invented the human as we continue to know it"; in other words, he invented our understanding of ourselves; his plays "are the wheel of our lives, and teach us whether we are fools of time, or of our parents, or of ourselves"; some of these claims (may) have intrigued some Bloom critics, but one can also notice, in the age of the Internet, that a Yahoo "William Shakespeare" search (in September 2015) gives you about twenty-two-million results, i.e. one would need about forty-two years of his/her life if he/she decided to spend one minute on each site (so forget about anything like two, three..., or ten-twenty... minutes); this is more than overwhelming.

Our choice here is to focus just on one contemporary author who thought of writing two Shakespeare-related plays, in a twentieth-century when the great Elizabethan, after having defied generations of critics' and writers' expectations, provided the subject of dozens and dozens of fictionalizations; we might attempt here a sketchy thematic categorization (with the almost useless note that many of them fall into more than one categories): dealing with Shakespeare's youth (Bruce Cook's Young Will..., Stephanie Cowell's The Players: A Novel of the Young Shakespeare or Bailey MacDonald's Wicked Will: A Mystery of Young Shakespeare) and with his love life (the rather recent Shakespeare in Love by Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, along with Faye Kellerman's The Quality of Mercy, Lisa M. Klein's Love Disguised, Carolyn Meyer's Loving Will Shakespeare, Pamela Mingle's Kissing Shakespeare, or Anthony Burgess's quattro-centenary celebration in his 1964 Nothing Like the Sun.../beginning of Sonnet 130/); or the poet's "secret life" (Jude Morgan's The Secret Life of William Shakespeare, J. L. Carrell's The Shakespeare Secret and the very recent Interred with Their Bones by the same); his family (Robert Nye's Mrs. Shakespeare..., Grace Tiffany's My Father Had a Daughter: Judith Shakespeare's Tale or Arliss Ryan's novel The Secret Confession of Anne Shakespeare...); thriller-type writings (Leonard Tournay's Time's Fool: A Mystery of Shakespeare, Lou Handelhand's Shakespeare Undead or Robert J. Harris' Will Shakespeare and the Pirate's Fire...); fantasy tales (Elizabeth Bear's Hell and Earth... and Ink and Steel..., or Ian Doescher's William Shakespeare's The Jedi Doth Return and William Shakespeare's The Empire Striketh Back); Shakespeare for children (Gary L. Balckwood's three novels in The Shakespeare Stealer Series or Susan Cooper's King of Shadows); fiction based on Shakespeare's plays (Simon Hawke's A Mystery of Errors, The Slaying of the Shrew, Much Ado About Murder, and The Merchant of Vengeance, Lisa Klein's Ophelia, Lisa Fiedler's Romeo's Ex: Rosaline's Story, Caroline B. Cooney's Enter Three Witches, Grace Tiffany's Ariel or Alan Gratz's Something Rotten); in relation to his contemporaries (M. G. Scarbrook's The Marlowe Conspiracy, Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon's No Bed for Bacon or, once again, Anthony Burgess' A Dead Man in Deptford); then many other "remakes" by Sarah H. Hoyt, Lore Segal, Jess Winfield, Stanley Wells (one of the world's leading Shakespeare scholars), Pauline Montagna, Melinda Taub, Charlie Lovett, Elizabeth Hand, Rory Clements, Henrietta Buchmaster...

And Edward Bond (b. 1934), the Marxist-socialist "despairing nihilist," (Billington), author of over fifty plays, who, in Lear (1971) and Bingo (1973) sets for himself a double target: first, to prove that George Bernard Shaw was wrong in believing that "no man will ever write a better tragedy than Lear" (and Shaw was not alone in this belief); and, second, that Shakespeare, first praised by his friend (and rival) Ben Jonson ("Shakespeare was not of an age, but for all time"), was far from being the Renaissance Jesus Christ figure of literary creativity that Harold Bloom made him to be; we can also remember that in a previous book (The Anxiety of Influence, 1973) Bloom had shown that Shakespeare was able to eclipse all writers who preceded him and to dominate all writers who have followed him (including Bond?—one wonders); but, rather, that Shakespeare was a bourgeois ruthless, cruel, inhuman egoist and also an irresponsible drunk.

So, since Bond seems ambitiously and challengingly derivative, we can ourselves be a little more systematic and look at things in a certain order of coherence; the twentieth (and twenty-first)-century playwright needed previous "facts" to build on, and these are King Lear and Shakespeare's biography—more particularly, his last months and days.

The "facts" of and about King Lear are pretty well-known, so we need only summarize them with a view to what follows. Completed, in several variants, with significant differences

among them, between 1603 and 1606, the play was published in the 1608 and 1619 quartos and in the First Folio of 1623; among its sources (see, for instance, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, edited in 1923 in eight volumes by Geoffrey Bullough, with volume 4 about Lear) are, first, Raphael Holinshed's 1587 The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande, itself based upon the twelfth-century Historia Regum Britaniae by Geoffrey of Monmouth (about a legendary queen Cordelia of the Britons); then Edmund Spenser's 1590 The Fairie Queene and Sir Philip Sidney's 1590 Arcadia, an anonymous King Leir of 1594 (in which Shakespeare seems to have performed as an actor), an older fairy tale titled Love Like Salt and a Ballad of King Leir and His Three Daughters and others.

The story Shakespeare borrowed from these many sources is that of an aging kind of Britain who decides, before it is too late, to divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters; for which he has the idea of a test, as to how and how much each of them loved him: Goneril and Regan provide flattering answers, while the youngest daughter, Cordelia, prefers to keep silent; and so, an enraged Lear disowns her, only to gradually discover how bad his decision was, as he is betrayed by the two elder daughters; and he slowly grows insane so that in the end Shakespeare shows him on the heath in a thunderstorm, accompanied by his Fool (who mocks Lear's misfortune) and his son-in-law Kent.

There is also a secondary subplot, revolving around the elderly nobleman Gloucester, father of Edgar (legitimate son) and Edmund (illegitimate), with the latter tricking him into believing Edgar is trying to kill him. Gloucester helps Lear, so Regan and her husband Cornwall gouge out his eyes. This is only the first of a series of cruelties, including Cornwall being mortally wounded by a servant, Edmund killed by Edgar, the execution of Cordelia (by Edmund, Regan and Goneril), Regan poisoned by Goneril—who then kills herself—, Gloucester dying off-stage, Lear bearing Cordelia's corpse in his arms and his own death.

So, basically, a tragedy about the operations of evil and viciousness (in Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund), about the ugly and awkward aspects of the human condition, with a pathetic old father and king trapped in a violent human environment; so he finally seems to have usurped life itself, making a twentieth-century critic (Ian Kott) see him/Shakespeare here as a precursor of absurdist theatre (Beckett in particular).

A very powerful tragedy that, in its turn, has become the "source" of alternative versions, adaptations, continuations, retellings and/or re-writes. First among these is Nahum Tate's 1681 The History of King Lear, where the important Fool is omitted entirely, Lear and Cordelia survive, while Edgar marries the latter. Then, partially based on Shakespeare's play is William Blake's 1789 poem "Tiriel"; next chronologically is Emile Zola's 1887 graphically violent (and obscene) novel La Terre, on the horror of aging and the tragedy of mental reduction; there is also an "Yiddish Queen Lear," Mirele Efros in 1892 by Jacob Gordin, a 1991 novel of the American Jane Smiley, A Thousand Acres (a modernized retelling set on a farm in Iowa, managed by Larry Cook and his three daughters, in the neighborhood of Harold Clark who, like Gloucester, has two sons, Loren and Jess), an absurdist comic novel Fool (2009) by Christopher Moore (with a 2014 sequel, The Serpent of Venice) and...

And Edward Bond's play Lear, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1971; it comes after his 1965 Saved, where the audience witnesses the stoning of a baby onstage, and the 1968 Early Morning, about cannibalism (and not only). In his preface to Lear Bond admits: "I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners"; so Lear has been called the most violent drama ever staged; it begins (with two workers carrying a dead laborer on stage and with Lear shooting the worker who had caused the man's death) and ends (Lear himself shot dead in the woods by the Farmer's Son and his body left

alone on stage) in violence, as in the author's Marxist-socialist-Brechtian view the world is a violent place, with all governments and all revolutions as violent and alike in their ruthless cruelty and disregard of human life; hence the author's graphic depictions, unflinching brutality, savagery, horrors, mutilations and murders onstage and/or offstage; one can only wonder if this is catharsis taken to its extreme form; and also remember that there is violence in Shakespeare's plays as well (Titus Andronicus, Macbeth, Hamlet, Julius Caesar..., King Lear—see supra), primarily required and encouraged by Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences that reveled in shocking drama (treachery, debauchery, murder, suicide, gore, brutality...); but, there is modus in rebus.

Structured in three acts (seven-plus-seven-plus-four scenes), the play lists fifty-three named roles, including generals and other officers, court officials, soldiers, workers, strangers, prisoners...; the plot revolves around ancient Britain's (with modern devices) old King's growth as an individual; at the beginning, the cruel king builds a wall around his kingdom, to protect himself and his people and he gradually changes through suffering—betrayed, judged, imprisoned, and put in a straight-jacket, his eyes removed “technologically” with a machine that sucks out his eyeballs—toward the possibility of compassion and kindness, so in the end he is willing to give his own life because of the good it might do to others (he is seen digging up his own wall).

The play's controlling metaphor is thus this unseen wall, and the audiences (and readers) of the early 1970s were most likely invited to remember the cruelties of the second world war, the 1956 invasion of Hungary, that of Chechoslovakia in 1968, the same year's assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Cold War years, Socialism and its dictatorships in eastern Europe and Asia, the Berlin Wall probably (built in 1961) and, why not, Robert Frost's “Mending Wall” (“Something there is that doesn't love a wall,” and “Good fences make good neighbors,” or “Before I built a wall I's as to know/ What I was walling in or walling out...”). Lear's meaning is made clear when his two wicked daughters reveal their plan to take over the kingdom: “I built my wall against you as well as my other enemies”; it stands, otherwise, for political power, isolation, destruction, suffering, prison life and death.

The other important characters are the two evil daughters, Bodice (plotting against her father, later sentenced to death by Cordelia and stabbed by soldiers with a bayonet three times) and Fontanelle (pokes Bodice's knitting needles into Warrington's ears, signs Lear's death warrant, is shot by a soldier and autopsied onstage—authentic Bond signature--, with Lear awed by the beauty of the inside of her body as opposed to the hatred and cruelty of her character while alive), Lord Warrington/Gloucester (tongue cut out, needles into his ears, drowned in the well of the Gravedigger's Boy and his wife), Cordelia (no longer Lear's daughter, first the pregnant wife of the Gravedigger's Boy, then that of the Carpenter, raped by soldiers, ordering—while in power—the executions of Bodice and Fontanelle and the blinding of Lear), the Gravedigger's Boy's Ghost (teaches Lear compassion, mauled to death /sic/ by maddened pigs), the Duke of North and the Duke of Cornwall (both imprisoned by Cordelia), a Bishop, a Judge, a Councilor...

So Bond's modern gloss on King Lear finally turns out to be a systematic and hostile critique of Shakespeare's play, or a Brechtian critique of mid-twentieth-century culture; Castillo becomes helpful here: “In Lear, the building tension and the creation of the double takes place within the play as part of its action. Before his defeat by his daughters, Lear believed himself and his country secure... With his defeat..., the dream /of a polished and perfect state/ begins to disintegrate and the king's character splits into its human and its

dehumanized halves. The king withdraws from polite society into a nostalgic green world of peace and tranquility as a pig-keeper with the Gravedigger's Boy and his wife. The assassination of the Boy and his transformation into the Ghost that accompanies Lear in his later peregrination signals the creation of a dehumanized double, a double that is, moreover, neither ontologically stable nor complete..."(pp.79-80)

This Marxist absolutist's basic idea is that of Lear (and his people) as a caged animal: "There's an animal in a cage. I must let it out or the earth will be destroyed. There'll be great fires and the water will dry up. All the people will be burned and the wind will blow their ashes into huge columns of dust and they'll go round and round the earth forever! We must let it out!" (p.37) Bond's Lear is a paranoid outcast followed in a journey of self-revelation that takes him away from his daughters' imprisonment, while self-destructive Cordelia becomes in the end a Stalinist-type dictator, who takes the old king's place as a wall-builder; for Bond, Lear (his desire to ultimately see is almost immediately followed by his blinding) epitomizes all that was best and worst in twentieth-century Western culture; violence, authoritarianism and tyranny, aggressiveness... We find it appropriate to end this section about Lear with what William Gaskill (also director of Bond's plays) notices: "Bond seems determined to follow in the footsteps of Brecht and impose a dialectical theory on his imagination..."(in Billington); and with Martin Dodsworth's response to Lear as "an extravagance that is finally both boring and repellent." (in Oxford Illustrated... (p.482)

Even worse is Bond's second Shakespeare play, Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death (1973), whose misleading title says little about the great Elizabethan's early and unhappy ending; bingo is a game of chance invented in 1929 and played with numbers and cards (more recently, even online); the object is that of achieving a specified pattern from the drawn number, with the winner calling out "Bingo!" Is this what Mr. Combe tries to do in the play? Or Shakespeare himself? (the fortunate player wins if he draws the appropriate numbers before the others, not because he was more logical or intelligent). In an interview with the Sunday Times, quoted in Hay and Roberts, Bond himself attempts an explanation: "Art has very practical consequences. Most 'cultural appreciation' ignores this and is no more relevant than a game of 'bingo' and less honest."

Next, in his introduction, Bond cautiously admits that he was "not interested in Shakespeare's true biography"(p.4); so he was interested in Shakespeare's false biography? Anyway, the documented facts that he may have had in view (if not in mind) are there (in timelines, diaries, confessions, and biographies, including E. K. Chambers', that Bond quotes in his "Introduction").

Here are some of these facts: first, Shakespeare and his family; John Shakespeare was an important member of the Stratford community, occupying such positions as chamberlain of the borough, alderman and high bailiff, with a mottoed coat of arms granted him and his children in 1596; he died at seventy, in 1601, after having been married for forty four years to Mary Arden (died in 1608, at sixty-eight). When he returned to Stratford in 1613, Will re-joined his wife, Anne Hathaway (1555/56-1623)—Stephen Dedalus imagines an adulterous Anne in Joyce's Ulysses—and his two daughters (son Hamnet, Judith's twin brother, had died at eleven, in 1596), Susanna (1583-1649), married to noted physician John Hall, and Judith (1585-1662), his wayward daughter, married to vintner Thomas Quiney (whom Shakespeare disliked for having brought shame and embarrassment for his family).

Second, a Shakespeare timeline record how he became a very rich man (and one does not expect a Marxist writer to like rich people): in 1597 he bought the second largest home in Stratford for sixty pounds (ten fireplaces and two barns); with a few partners, as shareholders,

Shakespeare contributed to the building of the Globe Theatre on the south bank of Thames in 1599; in May 1602, for 320 pounds (a considerable sum at the time) Shakespeare acquired 107 acres of land from Old Stratford residents William and John Combe, and another cottage; Alchin: “The standing of Anne Shakespeare in the town and surrounding districts of Stratford continued to increase. The properties owned by her husband would have required servants including a gardener /see Bingo/. Her responsibilities as the wife of Shakespeare would have substantially increased...”; then, in 1605, Will purchased leases of real estate in the same area for 440 pounds, which doubled in value and earned him sixty pounds a year; in 1613 (not in 1616 as Bond would have it), the Glove was destroyed by fire (to be rebuilt in 1614 and finally closed in 1642), and Shakespeare decided to return to Stratford; not long before his death, the dramatist participated in the infamous (for Bond, especially) enclosure project, i.e. the enclosure of common land by owners of large tracts, which seems to have been disastrous for small tenants and the parish’s poor (Bond sees this incident “laced with echoes of King Lear’s injustices); this results in local riots and fire raising, with at least one young woman hanged (shown onstage by Bond on the gibbet and smelling rancid); peasants wrote to Shakespeare asking him for some help, but he did nothing; and Bond again: “His behavior as property owner made him closer to Generil than Lear. He supported and benefited from the Goneril-society—with its prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpit-hysteria and all the rest of it...”(p.6); the twentieth-century playwright will thus give us a conspirator (with other landowners), irresponsible to his society and also dominated by hatred and antipathy to his family—a horrible personality.

Shakespeare’s last act begins in March 1616, when he modifies his will giving most of his possessions to Susanna and her husband (also appointed as executors), little going to his wife and to Judith (see also Vern Thiessen’s 2005 play Shakespeare’s Will); though he began his will with “being in perfect health” (at the age of fifty-two!), one remembers him writing, some twenty years before, in his Sonnet 66: “Tir’d with all these, for restful death I cry...” Less than a month later, “Shakespeare, Drayton and Ben Jonson /just Shakespeare and Jonson in Bingo/ had a merry meeting and, it seems, drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted.” (John Ward, the vicar of Stratford, in his notebook of 1665; the same who wrote that “in his older days /Shakespeare/ lived at Stratford, and supplied the stage with two plays every year, and for it had an allowance so large that he spent at the rate of 1,000 pounds a year, as I have heard...”—see A. L. Rouse and the Diary of the Rev. John Ward, Vicar of Stratford-upon-Avon, Extending from 1648 to 1679, edited by Charles Severn in 1839).

In his Bingo, unfair to Shakespeare, Bond chose the worst moments (“scenes”) in Shakespeare’s life and highlighted them as the most decisive in order to subvert both the artist and the man; to reach his aim, Bond manipulated Shakespeare’s life events, changed names, dates and facts (forgetting Marx’s insistence on art as a truthful mirror or reflection of life and society), so he could show us a mean landlord, a corrupted person only interested in building his fortune and fame, motivated by money and greed, a bourgeois entrepreneur and apolitical capitalist, whose reputation is based on a flagrant discrepancy between word and action; also a guilt-ridden figure haunted by memories of the cruelty and injustice of his society.

Among the twelve characters of the play, the depressed, introspective and notably silent Shakespeare (“says nothing...,” “kept silent...,” “doesn’t react...”) is accompanied by a scolding Judith (who also resents Shakespeare’s treatment of her mother), a brain-damaged gardener, a pyromaniacal prostitute, a kind and caring Old Woman/Housekeeper, William Combe as a ruthless schemer, a religious zealot (son of the Old Man and Woman), peasant workers Jerome, Wally and Joan, Anne Hathaway/Shakespeare who is never seen onstage—

only heard, and Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's biliously envious drinking buddy at the "Golden Cross" road house.

The play is structured in two parts, of three scenes each, beginning sometime in November 1615, with Shakespeare in his garden and Combe's land scheme announced, and rapidly moving six months later, with the Young Woman executed (hanging onstage), another violent scene of bearbaiting (cruelty to animals) next to the theatre, then Shakespeare and Jonson getting drunk in a local hostelry, Shakespeare going out and re-enacting the blasted heath scene from *King Lear* as he sees a girl's mutilated corpse, then the brooding drunkard getting home and completing his will that Judith will be looking for in the last scene, after Shakespeare's suicide (poison pills he took from Jonson).

Obviously, Bond's is a revisionist portrait of Shakespeare, made up of a tragic figure haunted by images from his London past, showing indifference to his family and generosity towards his gardener and a beggar; in fact, a denunciation of the great dramatist, who is unable to hold up principles of justice, who "must learn that people have feelings," (this is almost too much to ask of the Renaissance author who "invented the human"), "who ignores the people he shares a house with..." (Judith), who is thus selfish and uncaring. And so, our "Bonded Shakespeare" is a much lesser Shakespeare than the one almost everyone has known for four hundred years, drastically diminished in his life and work by an apparently frustrated playwright, whose questionable talent seems damagingly controlled by his rigid Marxist ideology.

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