

EDWARD BOND: «LEAR WAS STANDING IN MY PATH...» - LEAR'S PROGRESSIVE JOURNEY FROM BLINDNESS TO MORAL INSIGHT AND ACTION

Hilde Klein

Edward Bond's adaptation *Lear* (1971) of Shakespeare's *King Lear* made a great impact on literary circles and many critics considered it to be a challenge to the unquestioned craftsmanship of the mythical figure of Shakespeare. Bond has stated in numerous interviews the reasons for his rewriting of *King Lear*. According to the playwright plays like *King Lear* have outlived their historical moments and entered the realm of myth. Bond wants his audience to be aware of the dangers which lie in the codification and perpetuation of the values of the old order. The audience has to escape from a mythology of the past in order to be free to correct injustices. The author felt the necessity to accomplish the correction of those injustices. «Lear was standing in my path and I had to get him out of the way»¹.

Bond argues that Shakespeare gave an answer to the problems of his particular society, which is not valid for our age. Therefore Bond feels the need to «rewrite it so that we now have to use the play for ourselves, for our society, for our time, for our problems...»²

Although Bond admires Shakespeare for his powerful criticism of the human condition, he does not share Shakespeare's focus on Lear's personal hardship rather than on the society that Lear had subjugated and tyrannized. Thus whereas Shakespeare's play transmits the idea of total resignation, Bond is anxious to show that this model is inadequate now. In his play Bond tries to make the audience reflect on the fact that an acceptance that mistakes have been committed is not enough; one has to proceed towards action and change.

¹ Edward Bond interviewed by the editors, «Drama and the Dialectics of Violence», *Theatre Quarterly*, 2 (1972), 8.

² «A Discussion with Edward Bond», *Gambit* 5/17 (1970), p. 24.

Bond feels very much attracted by the figure of Lear because he is a character who, as king, had lived a very protected life. Once disposed of his power he has to recognize that the world does not exist for his benefit and he has to cope with a completely new situation. Bond says: «He's rather like a child growing up and learning to live, but the astonishing... and the disturbing thing is that you see him do it as an old man... and suddenly he's born»³.

Bond wants to show that a man capable of learning at great age and realizing the mistakes he has committed is still able to correct those mistakes by action and setting a new example. Here lies the remarkable difference between Shakespeare and Bond: Shakespeare's Lear turns to resignation and protection, Bond's Lear to a readjustment of his behaviour and to a new action in consequence, even dying for a just cause.

Another important difference resides in Bond's treatment of Cordelia, who in Bond's play is not a physical daughter of Lear, but a revolutionary who takes over power, although she could be considered a spiritual daughter in the sense that she repeats Lear's errors in basing her system on violence and oppression. Bond translates Shakespeare's Cordelia into two characters: the guerrilla woman, defensive, a victim of the war, and the Gravedigger's Boy who maintains some of the charitable instincts of Shakespeare's Cordelia. Bond considers Shakespeare's Cordelia to be «an absolute menace - a very dangerous type of person»⁴, because she offers her poor old father an idyllic retreat and hampers his evolution by encouraging his resignation. So Bond wants to redefine the relationship between Cordelia and Lear. Goneril and Regan, in turn, are «rechristened» by Bond in Bodice and Fontanelle and remain Lear's physical daughters.

Lear is structured as an epic drama which enables Bond to present in a series of small-scale scenes Lear's learning-progress from moral blindness and inhumanity to moral insight and humanity. Lear is the central figure of this pilgrimage, surrounded by some ten other main characters and about seventy further figures. In his Preface to *Lear*⁵ Bond explains that the minor speaking parts can be considered as one role showing the character of a society. The audience is thus presented with social and moral perceptions of the world.

At the opening of the play, Bond presents us with a powerful symbol for the restriction of freedom, for oppression and for authority - a WALL. The wall testifies to Lear's authoritarian régime, where aggression and violence have become institutionalized. Ironically, due to Lear's self-delusion, the wall, for him, symbolizes peace and security.

LEAR. I started this wall when I was young. I stopped my enemies in the field, but there were always more of them. How could we ever be free? so I built this wall to keep our enemies out. My people will live behind this wall when I'm dead.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴ Simon Trussler, «Edward Bond, the long road to Lear», *New Theatre Voices of the Seventies*, Methuen, London 1981, p. 29.

⁵ Edward Bond, *Lear*, Methuen, London 1972, p. xiv (Page numbers of subsequent quotations given in the text).

You may be governed by fools but you'll always live in peace. My wall will make you free... (pp. 3-4).

The declaration «a wall for peace» is followed by Lear's shooting of an innocent workman and the conspiracy of his daughters against him. The construction of the wall has absorbed Lear's whole life, yet he has never finished it and it never will be finished. There will always be somebody trying to tear the wall down since it deprives the countrymen of their mobility and freedom. The wall not only keeps the enemies out, but it also keeps the people in, and the more oppressive the system, the more enemies it creates. Furthermore, Lear may claim the building of the wall to be an altruistic gesture towards his people, but we soon detect that his apparent benevolence is a rather self-absorbed gesture to glorify his memory.

LEAR. When I'm dead my people will live in freedom and peace and remember my name, no venerate it!... (p. 7)

The wall restricts Lear's capacity to express genuine feelings and isolates him from the processes of the outer world. In his despotism he does tolerate any criticism, not even from his daughters, whom he also considers as his enemies.

LEAR. ...I knew you were malicious. I built my wall against you as well as my other enemies!... You have murdered your family. ... You have perverted lusts. I've watched you scheme and plan - ...Where will your ambition end? You will throw old men from their coffins, break children's legs, pull the hair from old women's heads, ... The people will judge between you and me. (p. 7)

A moment before, Lear had just misinterpreted his daughters' slyness in his self-deceit.

LEAR. O my poor children, you're too good for this world. (...) You see how well they'll govern when I'm dead. Bodice, you're right to be kind and merciful, and when I'm dead you can be - because you will have my wall. You'll live inside a fortress. Only I'm not free to be kind or merciful. I must build the fortress. (pp. 4-5).

In Act One we witness the myth of Lear's power and how he abuses it. His destructive policies provoke the revolt of his daughters and the final insurgency of Cordelia, because they continue the ideology of Lear's régime, where justice is subordinated to power, and «when this happens power takes on the dynamics and dialectics of aggression...» (Preface, p. xiii). Words like «protection, freedom, justice...» are empty slogans in such a system, as is manifest in Lear's daughters because once they have assumed power they belie their former confrontation with their father when they pleaded for justice.

Lear reveals his position in the cycle of violence when he exclaims, referring himself to his sons-in-law:

They're my sworn enemies. I killed the fathers therefore the sons must hate me. And when I killed the fathers I stood on the field among our dead and swore to kill the sons!... (p. 5).

However, at this point, Lear does not yet recognize his role in the cycle.

When Lear is deposed of his power after the revolution headed by his daughters he contemplates a world in ruins, but is still so self-deceived that he does not understand that the horror around him is a consequence of his own destructive policies. Bond concentrates on this theme, violence caused by a repressive power system, where humanity is absent and where violence originates more violence.

In Act One, Scene Four, Bond shows the extreme vileness of Lear's daughters and their sadistic cruelty in the way they torture Warrington. Ironically, Lear asks: «Where does their vileness come from?» (p. 9) Lear does not see that the terrible violence is the product of his system.

Once deposed of his power, Lear gives way to self-pity and the thought of his ungrateful daughters obsesses him.

LEAR. My daughters have taken the bread from my stomach. They grind it with my tears and the cries of famished children - and eat. ... I am a famished dog that sits on the earth and howls. ... They lock the door of my coffin and tell me to die. ... I'm old and too weak to climb out of this grave again. (p. 17).

The deposed king is given shelter by the Gravedigger's Boy and there, in a pastoral setting, he wants to forget the burden of the past, yet the past haunts him in the figure of the tormented Warrington, who reminds him of his own miserable condition.

LEAR. He's dead! I saw his face! It was like a stone! I shall die! (p. 22).

Lear is aware of his misery but still unable to analyse its causes. He is still corrupted and his corruption infects the pastoral life of the farm.

Frequently Bond recurs to the technique of «foreshadowing» an event; thus the torture of Warrington and his presence on the farm where he stains the Boy's well, indicate both Lear's pollution and the forthcoming destruction of the idyllic refuge. The soldiers kill the Boy, violate his wife Cordelia and take Lear to the presence of his daughters, now in power, who will preside over his trial. Bond does not allow his Lear the peaceful retreat of the farm, because he has to pass through more suffering in order to learn. Lear is aware now of the violence which occurred on the farm, but he does not yet grasp the origin of it.

At the beginning of Act Two there is little glory left for Lear; the myth he had constructed so carefully has vanished. His educational process continues. Act Two is identified by Bond as «the clash between myth and reality». (Preface, p. xiv) Lear still considers himself to be the centre of the universe, but we witness his first self-realizations, although the emphasis is still on the pronoun «I».

LEAR. I can't live with that suffering in the world. (p. 35).

Lear is so concerned with his own suffering that he does not recognize himself to be only one of the many who suffer the consequences of an unjust society. In this sense, he has become the victim of his own system, a system he constructed in the role of aggressor. The duality of aggressor / victim united in one person is a frequent dramatic recourse in Bond's plays; the aggressor becomes a victim of the oppressive system he has perpetuated or in which he happened to be born.

Lear sees himself as a trapped animal and conveys as such a state of terrible unrest and pathos.

LEAR. ...This is a little cage of bars with an animal in it. (...) No, no, that's not the king! (...) Who shut that animal in that cage? Let it out. Have you seen its face behind the bars? There's a poor animal with blood on its head and tears running down its face. Who did that to it?... its wings are broken. ... O God, there's no pity in this world. ... (p. 35).

The metaphor of the caged animal reinforces the idea of oppression, of a lack of freedom, and established a link with the wall symbol. It points to the oppressive past of the system, the present state of affairs and indicates the continuation of oppression in the future. «What will they do to it?» (p. 35).

Lear has withdrawn into a world of dreams and mystical symbols, which are a reflection of his anguish and shattered emotional state. All the images which cause Lear's distress are connected with death and violence, and they will finally help him to comprehend the mistakes he committed and to understand why violence erupts.

After the mock trial, where no one listens to Lear, where the officials are merely pawns due to Bodice and Fontanelle's lack of authority or moral integrity to judge their father, and where revenge is the driving force rather than justice, Lear finds himself in a prison-cell, and the ghost of the Gravedigger's Boy appears. The Ghost is one of Bond's dramatic devices and functions as contrast to Lear to demonstrate the struggle going on in his consciousness. Lear is still divided between his memories of the «Golden Age» —as a powerful king— represented by the Ghost, and his advance towards reflection and rectification.

The image of twinning, of a divided personality, is recurrent in Bond's plays.

... There is a certain sort of struggle in people about various parts of themselves, some of which as one gets older one has to get rid of. And if one can't get unity between these various personalities, then one can't achieve coherent action. ...he (Lear) has to disown something of himself. ...⁶.

Lear's attitude to the Ghost of the Gravedigger's Boy is one of paternalism; he admits the guilt he did him once and wants to protect him now, yet indirectly he intends to protect his own past. While Lear is tempted with visions of the past age, he cannot learn, because, for Bond, to return to the past is a destructive attitude and Lear has to reject that sort of conception. Thus, the presence of the Ghost is pernicious to Lear's progression because, thought it comforts him in his sufferings, it wants Lear to recapitulate in his struggle and to retreat into bearing his pain with silent stoicism. The gradual decaying of the Ghost signifies Lear's progress in apprehension.

Lear becomes more aware of his guilt when Fontanelle denounces him:

FONTANELLE. For as long as I can remember there was misery and waste and suffering wherever you were. You live in your own mad world, you can't hear me. You've wasted my life and I can't even tell you. O God, where can I find justice? (p. 56).

⁶ Trussler, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

Lear's state of apprehension gets stronger when the Ghost conjures up the spirits of his daughters. Lear recalls the innocence of his daughters in their childhood, an innocence corrupted by his duplicity and his system. Later Lear contemplates the remains of Fontanelle and is amazed at the stillness, beauty and peace around her. This image of peacefulness is very powerful in contrast to the extreme vileness of Fontanelle in the torture scene.

Finally Lear assumes responsibility for the corruption of her once uncorrupted nature.

LEAR. I destroyed her! I knew nothing, saw nothing, learned nothing! Fool! Fool!...

... 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 become a child, hungry and stripped and shivering in blood, I must open my eyes and see! (p. 60).

Bond dramatizes Lear's final insight by Lear's blinding.

...Lear is blind till they take his eyes away, and by then he has begun to see, to understand. (Blindness is a dramatic metaphor for insight, that is why Gloucester, Oedipus and Tiresias are blind). (Preface, p. xiii).

In the blinding scene the author introduces the dramatic device of anachronism to stress the frightful efficiency of modern technology in the method of blinding Lear, which reminds us of the efficiency of modern armaments. The scientist here involved is a dangerous person because of his being so extremely polite, so efficient, and so totally without feeling.

Eventually Lear adopts the role of an apostle who talks to the crowds who come to listen to him, when he tells them a fable about a bird who was locked in a cage. (v. pp. 74-75) Bond wants to show the audience that words are insufficient if not followed by action.

THOMAS. We talk to people but we don't really help them. We shouldn't let them come here if that's all we can do. It's dangerous to tell the truth, truth without power is always dangerous. And we should fight! ... (p. 76).

At the end of Act Two Lear kneels by the wall and reflects: «How many lives have I ended here?» (p. 66) In Act Three Lear arrives at the resolution that the past is not tenable any more, but he does not yet believe that action could effect any change.

LEAR sits. ...

What can I do?... I know nothing, I can do nothing, I am nothing. (p. 80).

In his final confrontation with Cordelia Lear utters the truths acquired during his painful pilgrimage to insight. Lear is Cordelia's conscience, yet she objects to rectifying her attitude. Her ideology is based, as was Lear's, on force. Before she took up power she meant not to use violence —«When we have power these things won't be necessary». (p. 45)— but once power is achieved, Cordelia proceeds with the same oppressive methods as in the former régimes. She wants Lear

to stop talking and subdues her own voice of conscience, because that voice is not acceptable in a totalitarian system. As Lear fails to convince her to stop the building of the wall—a symbol of oppression—he sadly admits that «nothing's changed! A revolution must at least reform!» (p. 84) If not, there will always be a violent reaction. Lear pleads for Cordelia's pity, but she only responds with well-known political slogans.

CORDELIA. ...we'll make the society you only dream of. (p. 85).

Lear's final words: «Your Law always does more harm than crime, and your morality is a form of violence» (p. 85) repeat Bond's affirmation in his Preface:

... Aggression has become moralized, and morality has become a form of violence. (p. vii).

and summarize Lear's final recognition of the structure of an oppressive system of society. As Lear disowns his part, there is no reason for the Ghost's existence; it has «to die». The violent «death» of the Ghost, torn by squealing, angry pigs, indicates Lear's past violent system and his terrible sufferings in his progress to insight. Lear's speech after the Ghost's death comprises his learning process.

I see my life, a black tree by a pool. The branches are covered with tears. The tears are shining with light. The wind blows the tears in the sky. And my tears fall down on me. (p. 86).

This speech expresses both grief and clear vision. Out of this new understanding Lear gropes forward to the wall with the intention of demolishing it. Though an impossible task, this is not a futile gesture, as Lear sets an example to the young people of the play, the new inhabitants of the hut in the wood. It is a tragic gesture, because it costs Lear's life, yet it is a gesture full of hope. If there is only one person to oppose the system, there will be the possibility of changing it. One of the workers who are to continue the building of the wall «looks back». (p. 88) He has understood the meaning of Lear's action.

Bond's starting point in the play is the wall-symbol; the beginning points towards the end and the end recalls the beginning. The playwright indicates with this powerful symbol that oppression has always dominated history. Yet by re-writing *King Lear* he insinuates that the audience, like Lear, should assuage the past and understand the inadequacy of past answers. For Bond, the past is important as far as it answers «... how we got here. We can only find out where we are by looking at what we've been»⁷. The play is modern, although it deals with a past situation, in the sense that it deals with the everlasting theme of power struggles and violence.

Bond wants each member of the audience to be the person who «looks back» and to proceed to action. If we change human consciousness, if we assume the idea of responsibility as Lear does in his final recognition, then a change in society is possible.

⁸ Edward Bond interviewed by Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 23/11/1984.

BOND. ...You don't change society by changing the people in power⁸.

Bond's *Lear*, and in general all his plays, are conceived in order to provoke a change in the audience by changing their consciousness. «We do not need a plan of the future, we need a method of change». (Preface, p. xiii).

Whether or not Bond provides this method through his plays, the necessity for change remains one of his urgent statements.



⁸ Ibid.