



The Subversion Of Shakespearean Legacy: Reinterpreting King Lear In Edward Bond's Lear

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Abstract: Edward Bond's *Lear* is the most controversial and violent play and the title itself suggests, a radical reworking of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It focuses on how Bond subverts Shakespeare's text to critique modern political and social structures. Through an anti-authoritarian perspective, Bond transforms Shakespeare's tragedy of personal folly into a dystopian narrative that underscores the violence and alienation inherent in authoritarian power. Bond's reimagined *Lear* dissects the hierarchical and militaristic society by shifting its focus from the moral tragedy of kingship to an exploration of oppression, social responsibility, and systemic cruelty. Using critical frameworks from Brechtian alienation and Marxist criticism, this article highlights Bond's critique of power and the tragic consequences of its unbridled exercise.

Index Terms - Shakespearean legacy, King Lear, power, violence, tragedy, Brechtian alienation, Marxist criticism

I. INTRODUCTION

Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) stands as a daring reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, not merely as a homage but as a deeply political critique, aimed at dismantling the Shakespearean legacy to foreground Bond's own themes of social responsibility and authoritarianism. By stripping *Lear* of its Renaissance ideals and embedding it in a world marked by institutional violence and oppressive structures, Bond creates a work of radical theatre, unsettling yet purposefully didactic.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare presents a tragedy that focuses on Lear's personal failure as a father and a monarch, a downfall resulting from hubris and blindness. Bond, however, refocuses this character, transforming Lear from a figure of tragic folly into an emblem of authoritarian cruelty. Lear in Bond's play begins as a ruthless tyrant, committed to constructing an enormous wall that symbolizes the suppression of

dissent and the division between the powerful and the oppressed. Bond's *Lear*, in his initial justification of the wall, proclaims, "The wall must be finished. The wall will make our country strong," a line that captures the bleak insistence on division and control, reminiscent of totalitarian doctrines that Bond criticizes.

Unlike Shakespeare's *Lear*, who learns through suffering, Bond's *Lear* undergoes a moral awakening that reveals the futility and destructiveness of power. His journey is not toward personal redemption but an ethical realization of the responsibility he bears toward society. This reimagining elevates *Lear* from a tale of personal tragedy to a Marxist critique, which Brechtian alienation techniques reinforce, prompting the audience to confront the social structures Bond deems destructive.

A central motif in Bond's *Lear* is the wall, a stark departure from the symbolic elements of Shakespeare's pastoral and stormy landscapes. Here, the wall embodies institutionalized violence and serves as a physical and ideological barrier, perpetuating a system that divides and controls. As Bond's *Lear* states, "The wall isn't just stones. It's the law. It's the order that protects us." This line reveals its juxtaposition of protection with oppression, underscoring how authoritarian power is often justified through the rhetoric of security.

The wall, as an embodiment of authority. Its impersonal, monolithic presence within the narrative dislocates any natural or personal connection that audiences might form with the play's world. Through the wall, Bond captures the psychological alienation that pervasive authority imposes on individuals, leading to what theorist Herbert Marcuse describes as a "one-dimensional" society, where autonomy is repressed in favor of conformity and submission.

Violence in *Lear* is not merely a spectacle but a tool Bond uses to reveal the mechanisms of oppression within authoritarian states. Unlike the tragic violence in Shakespeare's play, which is rooted in the personal and familial, Bond's violence is systemic, pervasive, and almost ritualistic, exposing the brutality that characterizes institutional power. Early in the play, the mutilation of *Lear*'s eyes becomes a public spectacle, akin to ritualized state violence intended to instill fear and submission. This cruelty, unlike the intimate betrayal in *King Lear*, serves to illustrate how governments perpetuate authority by dehumanizing dissenters.

The constant, graphic violence in *Lear* serves as Bond's method of desensitizing the audience, a technique reminiscent of Brecht's alienation effect, where the audience is compelled to view the brutality from a critical distance rather than becoming absorbed in emotional sympathy. Bond's decision to make violence overt is deliberate; he rejects the Shakespearean catharsis, instead pushing the audience towards political reflection. As critic David Tuillon asserts, Bond's *Lear* is "a work of terror...not to thrill, but to educate."

Bond's *Lear* is deeply influenced by Marxist thought, and this perspective permeates the play's exploration of authority and class. The play critiques the elite's systemic exploitation of the working class, illustrating that authority is sustained by the subjugation of the masses. Characters such as Bodice and Fontanelle, Lear's daughters, exemplify the corruption of power, disregarding any loyalty to family or ethics in favor of personal gain. Bond's depiction of Bodice and Fontanelle's ruthless ambition extends the Marxist critique, showing that loyalty and empathy are sacrificed on the altar of power.

Furthermore, *Lear*'s final scenes reveal Bond's ultimate assertion of the humanistic duty to oppose tyranny. Unlike Shakespeare's *Lear*, who perishes tragically bereft of hope, Bond's *Lear* dies aware, declaring, "The world needs change, not walls." This line encapsulates Bond's message: that societal structures, not divine fate, are responsible for human suffering, and it is the people who must initiate change.

Conclusion

In reworking *King Lear*, Edward Bond not only subverts Shakespeare's narrative but also transforms the legacy of tragedy. Bond's *Lear* presents a vision that is distinctly modern, wherein tragedy is defined not by the fall of kings but by the suffering of societies. Through a dismantling of Shakespearean themes and the infusion of Brechtian and Marxist elements, Bond challenges the audience to engage in active reflection and confrontation of authority. *Lear* becomes a testament to Bond's belief in theatre as a means of social critique, pushing the boundaries of traditional drama to instigate dialogue and awareness of oppressive structures in contemporary society. By reinterpreting Shakespeare's *Lear* in this way, Bond both honors and disrupts the Shakespearean tradition, showing that true homage lies not in reverence but in transformation.

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