Revue Africaine et Malgache de Recherche Scientifique (RAMReS) : Littérature, Langues et Linguistique

N°16, 1er Semestre – Juin 2024

Satirical Perspectives on Politics and Madness in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) and Edward Bond's *Lear* (1978)

Ousmane Aly PAME
ousmane.pame@ucad.edu.sn
Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal

Abstract - This article analyses the satirical representation of struggles for political power in seventeenth-century England by William Shakespeare, a leading figure of Elizabethan drama, as an attempt and a means of reintroducing ethics in the processes of gaining and exercising power. Adopting this artistic and ideological approach, contemporary iconoclastic playwright Edward Bond sets about reframing and bringing it into alignment with the societal demands of the 20th century. This research paper emphasises the choice of satire in *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear (1978*), as a narrative mode for exposing the faults and vices of the political class with a view to raising collective consciousness and creating the conditions for social well-being. As it scrutinises Shakespeare's and Bond's artistic, ideological and ethical perspectives on the disintegration of political consciousness and the collapse of society, it tests them against those of literary critics and also of intellectuals working outside the field of theatre. It also seeks to establish connections between the fictions of the playwrights and the sociopolitical realities of their respective periods.
Keywords: power, madness, imagination, injustice, chaos

Résumé - Cet article analyse la représentation satirique des luttes politiques dans l'Angleterre du XVIIe siècle par William Shakespeare, figure de proue de la dramaturgie élisabéthaine, comme une tentative et un moyen de recentrer l'éthique dans les processus de conquête et d'exercice du pouvoir. S'appropriant cette démarche artistique et idéologique, le dramaturge iconoclaste contemporain, Edward Bond, entreprend de la recadrer et de la mettre en phase avec les exigences sociétales du XXe siècle. L'article met l'accent sur le choix de la satire dans leurs pièces respectives, *King Lear* (1608) et *Lear (1978*) comme mode narratif pour dévoiler les tares et les vices de la classe politique en vue de relever le niveau de la conscience collective et de créer les conditions d'un mieux-être social.En croisant les perspectives artistiques, idéologiques et éthiques de Shakespeare et de Bond sur la désintégration de la conscience politique et l'effondrement de la société, ce travail de recherche les éprouve en les confrontant, à la fois, à celles de critiques littéraires et d'intellectuels qui se sont penchés sur le thème mais les travaux se situent en dehors du champ théâtral. Il s'efforce également d'établir des liens entre les fictions des deux dramaturges et les réalités politiques de leurs époques respectives.

INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608)[1] and Edward Bond's *Lear* (1978)[2] are gripping satirical tales portraying moral bankruptcy of political leadership, fierce human struggles for power, and collective descent into chaos. In the complementary dramatic worlds of their plays, where morality, logic, and reason are both intermittent and inconsistent, Shakespeare and Bond depict politics as

mere madness, a blind force that generates destructions and suffferings among their respective protagonists as well as tears of pain and laughter among their audiences. Politicians, on Shakespearean and Bondian grand circus-like stages, are tragicomic performers, who, parade between palaces and battlefields, in royal garments or madmen's rags, juggling with fire and empty pledges and mindlessly shaping or destroying human lives. They unfold dark agendas which inevitably lead to individual and collective disasters, losses and pain.
As Shakespeare and Bond delves into the complexities of human existence, they embark their audiences on a multitude of inextricable existential trajectories. In their attempts to chart the roots of insanity in human behaviours, both dramtatists rely so heavily on the power of satire and imagery to exhort their audience to a reflect upon the extravagances, follies and blindness of ruling classes, and repercussions on individual lives and societal dynamics. The worlds of their plays are, in fact, deliberately saturated with absurd conspiracies and cruelties to keep viewers and readers fully alert and focused on the social evils prevailing on and off stage, forcing them to take a vigorous moral and political stand vis-à-vis similar real-life events. In their theatrical representations of the disintegration of order and consciousness, Shakespeare evokes the autopsy of the human soul while Bond literally performs a dissection of a human body on stage to in an attempt to comprehend the nature of the beast in humans.

Although Bond's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) encompasses most of the key elements of the original work, its dramatic treatment and perspectives on the corruption of political power takes a different curve: it is a powerful critical assessment of his predecessor's drama. It attempts to rid the play of the inedaquacies of Elisabethan cultural worldview, to contextualise its perspective and align it with contemporary preoccupations with the hope of catalyzing profound societal reforms. Like his predecessor, Bond strongly believes in the power of theatre to raise human consciousness and change sociopolitical games.

This article seeks to examine the perspectives of William Shakespeare and Edward Bond, in their respective plays *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear (1978)*, on ethics and reason in the pursuit and/ or exercise of political power. It confronts the views of the dramatists with perspectives of literary critics and of intellectuals whose productions are outside the field of theatre. It also strives to establish connections between the fictions of Bond and Shakespeare and the political realities of their times.

This article is divided in three parts: the first examines the collective entanglement in a world of illusion and chaos, the second focuses on political greed and moral indigence. The third part scrutinises the moral and political awakening processes in the worlds of the two plays.

1. Entanglement in a world of illusions and chaos

Like in Plato's allegory of the cave, the characters in Shakespeare's *King Lear (1608)* and Bond's *Lear* (1978) make their existential journeys under the signs of darkness and confusion, and unaware of their own alienation. In their obscure and insecure universe, their collective and individual imagination gets trapped in the destructive spiral of human violence as it continuously feeds on fears and irrational actions, leading to an endless cycle of aggression, revenge and chaos.

The dramatic texts of Shakespeare and Bond poignantly demonstrate, in convergence with other insightful writings, that civilisations and human experiences in them are essentially mental, emotional and intellectual processes and constructions. Imagination is both the foundation and the driving force of human actions. In his theoritical book on theatre, *La trame cachée* (2000), Bond writes:

L'imaginaire est la source de ce qu'il y a de plus élevé et de plus bas chez les humains. Elle est la source des terreurs propres à la folie et elle inspire les idéaux. Quand l'imagination est liée à la raison elle est créatrice, mais quand elle est contrainte par la peur elle devient folle - et quand ceci se traduit en action elle devient destructrice. Sur une grande échelle, c'est là ce qui est à l'origine du totalitarisme politique et de l'absolutisme religieux. (Bond, 2000:107)

> (Imagination is the source of the highest and the lowest in human beings. It is the source of the terrors of madness and the inspiration of ideals. When imagination is linked to reason it is creative, but when it is constrained by fear it becomes mad and when this is translated into action it becomes destructive. On a large scale, this is what lies at the root of political totalitarianism and religious absolutism. (My translation)

In Bond's ontological conception, imagination and reality are fundamentally interconnected and interchangeable. Imagination is in opposition to illusion and nothingness: "L'imagination créé le réel et non ce qui est illusion, elle existe dans le réel et non dans le néant." (Bond, 2000: 195). His views on imagination and reality concurs with the analysis, contemporary medical doctors and psychotherapists, Gabor Maté and Daniel Maté, develop in their recent book the *Myth of Normal* (2022):

> The world we believe in becomes the world we live in. If I see the world as a hostile place where only winners thrive, I may become aggressive, selfish, grandiose to survive in such a milieu. Our beliefs are not only self-fulfilling; they are world-building. (Maté, 2022: 31)

The opening scenes of *Lear* (1978) and *King Lear* (1608) set audiences at the heart of a closed, self-destructive and claustrophobia-provoking world, and thus force them to examine the connections between poor political leadership and civil war. In both plays, the central characters are old, insecure and paranoid about their

political heritage and future of their realms. The transfer of the power to their descendants reveals their obsessions and chronic lack of discernement. Their senseless strategies and misjudgement set in motion a sequence of tragic events that lead to considerable losses of life and to the dissolution of the sociopolitical institutions they strive to perpetuate.

The action of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) takes place in various geographical locations in England and off stage, in the kingdom of France. But, as indicated by the journey of the main characters between their suffocating palaces and a barren heath, this movement from power to powerlessness and misery underlines an overwhelming sense of decadence and enclosure in their world. This oppressive power game in the play is symbolically evidenced by the tragic fraternal relationship between Edgar and Edmund, respectively the elder son and second illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester. In danger of his life because of the plots of his younger brother, Edgar runs away for his own safety. The persecuted fugitive soon realises, like the other victims in the play, that his island with its bordering cliffs and heavy military surveillance at its crossing point is but a high security prison.

Finding no safe refuge in the kingdom, Edgar resolves to disguise as a poor mad farmer and to lead to a remote and desert sanctuary where he is joined by other human wrecks, the deposed King Lear, and his loyal companions, the Fool and the blinded Gloucester. The characters' sense of entrapment and oppression is amplified, in *King Lear* (1608) and in *Lear* (1978), by the pervasive presence of sites of deprivation of freedom (prisons, cages), movement or sight-restricting devices (chains, blindfold) and desolate spaces (moor, graveyards) where life has ceased. The sense of being in an impregable fortress is reinforced, in the closing stages of Shakespeare's play, by the failure of the French troops, led by Cordelia, to defeat the tyrannical forces, represented by her sisters, Goneril and Regan. The play ends, however, in carnage and ruins, provoking a feeling of complete bewilderment, loss and waste on stage.

The tragic downfall of King Lear as well as the societal chaos prevailing in his realm highlight the failure of the central leadership to inspire enlightened governance, to uplift the collective consciousness and build constructive sociopolitical dynamics. Under the continuous assaults of irrational forces, the collective imagination collapses provoking the breakdown of communication channels and the rule of law and order. As a result of the societal breakdown and confusion, each of the play's characters feels stuck in their own world of illusions. Individually and collectively, they feel marginalised, disempowered and stuck in a world devoid of relational, emotional and moral intelligence, an atmosphere which contributes to underline a broader sense of absurd anarchy and the madness of their political system.

As the primary source and interface of the antagonistic sociopolitical forces, Lear experiences in his body and mind the corrosive frictions provoked by the struggles for power. His recurrent fits of anger which are expressed through uninterrupted flow of terrible curses and occasional physical violence towards the servants, are indicative of his growing frustration and of his unconscious desire to reintegrate the social game and regain full control over his subjects. As the monarch literally drowns in solitude and madness, the audience witnesses the widening the gap or wall between him, his court and subjects. Towards the end of his dramatic existence, the king's moral authority loses its consistency as the inaudibility, incoherence, and irrationality of words and actions become, like those of John Claire in Bond's *The Fool* (1976), potently illustrate.

Being an experienced head of state, Lear is expected to be a wisdom keeper in his realm as poet and artist John Claire, is supposed to be a beacon of light in the agrarian world of *The Fool* (1976). As his name and function symbolically suggest, Claire is expected to inspire, enlighten and shape the conscience of his people. Both heroes fail their missions, lose their minds and the ability to establish effective communication through verbal language. At height of their madness, Lear and Claire express themselves in inarticulate and unintelligible ways. Their incomprehensible language reinforces their own isolation in their sociopolitical circles. Towards the end of their dramatic lives, they become pathetic shadows of their former selves, more entangled in their inner chaos and lose progressively contact with the outside world.

The inability of Shakespeare's hero to understand, in the first place, the real motives of his own daughters, his blindness to the outcomes of his political decisions, (especially in the division of his kingdom and passing the power to much less virtous heiresses) and his stubbornness to stick to his own msitakes underline the spiritual desolation in the world of the play. Lear's lack of foresight is mirrored in the drama subplot: The Earl of Gloucester and his senile king appear like closely connected Siamese companions. They are both blind to their family and public businesses. Gloucester's physical blindess and Lear's madness, which takes place towards the end of their dramatic lives emphasise their common weakness of judgement. Gloucester stands out as a mere pawn in the hands of his illegitimate cunning son, Edmund. The Earl fails to see how the pernicious schemes of his younger son brings about distress both inside and outside his family circle. The limited perspective, the lack of perspicacity and insight in the face of deceit displayed by both King Lear and his Earl of Gloucester - highlights the destructive power of blind leadership.

At the outset of Edward Bond's version of *King Lear*, the defensive infrastructure under construction progressively becomes the dominant political institution in

the world of the drama. Its imposing presence, which is not visible when the curtain rises, appears first as a concept, a fruit of the old monarch's imagination, and a symbol of the state he envisions. It gradually draws the attention of the viewers as it crystalises the obsessions of the protagonists on stage. The defence wall the sovereign is builds around his realm is, in his terms, intended to provide protection, peace and freedom to his own subjects while keeping intruders out and neutralizing the main enemies of his kingdom, the Dukes of North and of Cornwall: "*I built this wall to keep our enemies out. [...] My wall will make you free.*" (Bond, 1978:17)

The solemnly proclaimed pledges of the Bondian hero are ironically contradicted by the forced labour he has institutionalised and the systematic executions of recalcitrant subjects. His defence and security strategies turn out to be appallingly useless and disastrous. Instead of creating a haven of peace and safety, it becomes an instrument to contain the subjects' aspirations to freedom and fulfilment. With the forced labour, socioeconomic restrictions and political repression, his kingdom, like Shogo's city in *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968) or Big Brother in the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), or quickly turns into a concentration camp. His daughters eventually marry the worst enemies of the kingdom, fight each other, and plot against their husbands, provoking an inextricable state of anarchy in and outside their kingdom.

Through his recurrent misjudgments and pathological obstination to build the happiness of his people against their own will, Bond's Lear catapults his kingdom into instability and civil war. His wall, a source of profound malaise and dissensions, becomes the very altar on which innocent farmers and soldiers as well as his heirs get sacrificed. He is eventually shot dead while he attempts to pull it down, after he understands, towards the end of his dramatic existence, that his infrastructure has become a graveyard for people's hopes and dreams of freedom, security and fulfilment. In the course of the pay, it metaphorically metamorphoses into a corrupting force, a gangrene that affects, immobilises and destroys progressively the whole social body. His workers develop cancer-like final stage symptoms with their stinking swelling feet and decomposing bodies. On this, Lou Lappin comments:

> By the end of the play, the wall has clearly become an image of spiritual dishealth. The villagers talk of disease and a mad king who took the men from the village till their hands "bled for week". Wall death, an affliction which the worker's feet swell in the mud exudes an ordor that's like "living in the grave" (Lappin, 1987: 130)

Lear's controversial security programme is a powerful metaphor for the absurd and inefficient barriers humans build to sever ties with neighbouring countries or monopolise common international resources: his state project is a vivid allusion to infrastructures like the Iron curtain between the West and East, the

walls in Jerusalem and at the border between the United States and Mexico, or the much disputed dams on River Nile between Sudan and Egypt and the impenetrable anti-immigrant administrative fortress the European Union is building around itself to control waves of immigrants, from mainly its "former" colonies. These infrastructures are, in fact, instruments of exclusion and oppression, and as such they exacerbate sociopolitical and economic tensions between nations and communities, and inevitably generate divides and conflicts.

It is instructive to note how Lear's defence strategy slips out of his control, starts to have a life of its own and outlives its inventor. It first passes into the hands of his daughters and then earns its glory in those of an unrelated, a rebel farmer Cordelia, who installs a more ferocious regime. Exceeding the initial efforts of its initiator, she carries the construction of the wall at a much higher cost in human lives, and justifies the mass killings of her oppressive regime by the necessity to keep the flag of patriotism high up. She sees herself as a radical patriot defending the freedom and independence of her country. Her spiritual evolution throughout the play is in counterbalances the course taken by the deposed monarch. Her trajectory symbolises, in Lappin's view, the perpetual rebirth of Lear's phoenix-like institution: "*As we witness the slow and painful transformation that Lear undergoes, the wall changes hands and almost assumes an autonomous existence of its own*". (Lappin, 1987: 128) Lear's political invention is, in fact, comparable to Frankenstein's monster, an artificial creature that escapes its inventor's control to commit considerable damages, including the destruction of its maker and itself. *King Lear*, like Bond's epic play, is an indictment of political leadership with loose moral boundaries.

Lear (1978), Frankenstein (1818) and *King Lear* (1608) are unsettling but unequivocal parables, which incriminate unrestricted ambition. Their naratives seem to point out that when politicians and scientists, the architects of collective consciousness and existence, fail to align with ethical values, waste, loss and sorrow are bound to happen. The tragedies the fictive worlds of Shelley, Shakespeare and Bond, which conclude with the moral torments and physical elimination of the central characters sound like pressing calls for the foundation of human action on ethics.

The opening scene of Shakespeare's tragedy presents the eponymous hero as the epitome of an unpredictable and morally corrupt political leader. His self-centeredness and irrational behaviour are displayed, in the outset of the drama, through his incoherences: he seeks, in fact, to maintain his moral and political authority after he gives up his royal attributes and keeps his high living standards symbolised by his request of one hundred knights by the hunting parties he organises for his fun. «*Lear wants the impossible- to have the honour and glory of power without its responsibilities; and in this desire lay part of the cause of his*

tragedy», comments Ralph E. C Houghton (Houghton, 1990:169). Goneril: "*Idle old man/ That still would manage those authorities/That he hath given away!*" (Houghton, 1990: 46). "*Tis the infirmity of his age", Regan warned earlier*". (Houghton, 1990: 37)

King Lear's mental confusion is also revealed, at the outset of the play, through his hypersensitivity to praises and incapacity to deal with contradictions or challenges. Entangled in his own illusions and unable to apprehend properly the world around him, the old king mishandles his power and paves the way for political conspiracies and manoeuvres in and around his court, which culminate in a ruthless battle for the throne.

The initial protocol King Lear sets to divide his kingdom among his three heiresses, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, is a pivotal event in the drama as it is Lear's last political game under his f ull authority. He "*has already divided his realm when the scene opens. It is therefore only the whim of the moment that makes him promise the best third to the daughter who tickles his vanity best in the protestation of his love*." (Houghton, 1990:168). The disinheritance and rejection of Cordelia, his one and only virtuous heiress as well as the banishment of his protesting but loyal servant, Kent are indicative of King Lear's blindness to truth. His preference for his deceitful courtiers proves that he sets a higher value on flattery, appearance, personal amusement over sincerity, reality and state responsibility.

The dramatic existence of Lear's daughters in Bond's play are articulated around illusions and self-deceits. For instance, in approaching their future husbands, the dukes of North and Cornwall, both Fontanelle and Bodice use false identities and strategems, thinking their marital alliances would pacify the relationships with the enemies of their kingdom. Their pre-war and wartime political machinations are efficiently counteracted by the husbands' mischievious manoeuvres. Instead of helping dissipate tensions, their loveless unions generate deep misunderstandings and bitter disappointments which end up embarking the whole kingdom on fierce war. The daughters'security plans, though fundamentally different from their father's, provoke the same results. They catapult the kingdom into a war that they intended to avoid. The peace and reconciliation Lear and his clan initially hoped to achieve at the outset of the play turn out be a mirage.

In a world distorted by injustice and fear, the exercise of power can be both an illusory, isolating and psychologically damaging experience. The ruling elites in *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear* (1978) go through the same tragic ordeals they impose on the people under their authority. The parable of a caged bird with broken wings in Bond's *Lear* (1978) is a gripping metaphor for the fate awaiting most architects of oppressive regimes. Bodice, like the ruling classes in the play, finds

out that the power she fought hard for and strives to maintain by all means has the paralyzing force of a straight jacket. Bitterly disillusioned about her tyrannical regime and its boomerang effects, she confesses: "*War power … I'm forced to sit at this desk, work with my sister, walk besides my husband. I don't decide anything. My decisions are forced on me […] I'm trapped […] Now I have all the power … and I'm a slave*". (Bond, 1978: 62-63)

The dramatic worlds of Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) and Edward Bond's *Lear* (1978) are saturated with violence and suffering. Both plays establish a clear connection between the sociopolitical chaos displayed on their stages, and the oppression exerted on the collective consciousness through destructive myths and ideologies. They aptly demonstrate, in other words, the complex and mutually nurturing relationships between the characters' imagination and the realities they experience. The grim tyrannical worlds Bond and Shakespeare portray in their respective plays are based on false beliefs, greed and irrationality.

2. Political Greed and Moral Indigence

In *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear* (1978), Shakespeare and Bond vividly dramatise a stark vision of a state of nature, a highly competitive world shaped by human greed and moral indigence, and inexorably bent on self-destruction. The mindless barbarians inhabiting the decaying realms of the plays are driven by a reckless obsession for power and material possessions. They often indulge in assassinations, torture and violence for no obvious reasons.

The breakdown of the sociopolitical structure in the play is underlined by the misalignment of the planetary elements. The '*ruinous disorders*' of the universe, which is a manifestation of divine wrath, seem to be provoked by the collective moral decadence of the humans. As their cosmic forces have seemingly resolved to take part in the human game, and be as playful, thoughtless and brutal as"*the wanton boys*" are towards flies, they, too, "*kill us for their sports*" (Shakespeare, 1990: 117). Nature and humanity, in the views of Shakespeare's characters, hold the same energy and keep the same cadence.

In *King Lear* (1608), the heroes' overwhelming perception of the world as a chessboard, on which each human is both an innocent victim of supernatural powers as well as a mere pawn in the cunning strategem of the other, is, in fact, emphasised in the play's characterization and stage, which set up its chessmen-like figures (king, queen, castle/rook, bishop, knight and pawn) on a ring-like platform. Its characters actively seek to trap, ruin and knock one another out of the sociopolitical arena. The figures' approach to life as a game of chess is emphatically highlighted by Kent when he reaffirms his complete loyalty to King Lear: "*My life I never held but as a pawn/ To wage against thine enemies; nor fear to lose*

it." (Shakespeare, 1990:31). The old monarch's irrational resolution to subject the division of his kingdom to his daughters' public protestation of their love for him is, in Houghton's view, a puerile "*trial of affection and a game to please his vanity*". (Houghton, 1990:166)

The cosmic forces in Shakespeare's fictional universe cease to be merciful, and set to dissipate "*the wisdom of nature*" (Shakespeare, 1990:42). They deprive humans of light, tranquillity and peace through disruptive phenomena such as eclipses, storms and thunder. The chaos in the universe is, at the same time a result, a cause and a reflection of the confusion of human consciousness. Cosmic disorders are rooted in human mindlessness, as Gloucester observes at the outset of the drama:

> These eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked between son and father […] As 'the King falls from bias of nature […] We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves…' (Shakespeare, 1990: 42)

An overwhelming sense of ecological and moral desolation pervades the dramatic world of Shakespeare's characters. The deposed monarch and his courtiers congregate on a barren heath, like a herd of injured predators trying to shake off their grief over their lost battles, power attributes, royal attires, family ties, in short, over their lost authority and respectability. This piece of desert moor, swept by very cold and violent storms, becomes a riveting symbol of the ongoing decadence and convulsions of their collective consciousness. Like the disrupted ecosystem of their sanctuary, the fragmented and incoherent stories they relate to comfort each other highlight the waste that their collective conduct has led them to. Like primitive reptilian creatures, with an oversized instinctive appetite and a tiny consciousness, they keep ruminating their remorses and sorrow.

The amorality of the characters in Shakespeare and Bond's tragedies is illustrated by the perverted sexual calculations of the daughters of the central heroes in both plays. Goneril and Regan in *King Lear* (1608), like Fontanelle and Bodice in Bond's play, use their sexuality as a political instrument to manoeuvre and control the men around them. Their actions are not restricted by any moral boundaries. Though they are sisters, they, for instance, strive to seduce the same man whom they obviously do not love, and who has no affection for none of them. They fiercely fight to have a grip on him as they consider him an essential agent in the expansion of their own political influence. Their senseless rivalry becomes their main weakness as it makes them vulnerable and malleable. In other words, while they are busy trying to neutralise each other's strategem and force, they both

become, in the process, easy preys to the politicians they seek to control. Edmund, in *King Lear* (1608), cunningly turns the antagonistic ambitions and schemes of Goneril and Regan, to his own political advantage: "*To both these sisters*, he confesses, *I sworn my love; /Each jealous of the other, as the stung / Are of the adder*". (Shakespeare, 1990:150)

Because of their political and sexual obsessions, Lear's heiresses never miss an opportunity to gamble their hearts and dignity away to achieve their immediate political goals. As inveterate gamblers dominated by their instincts, they seem unable to resist the temptations to betray and subject their senile father to mental torture, to engage in loveless unions and/or to plot against their husbands. In their theatrical delineation of human unconsciousness and instinctive mischief, Bond and Shakespeare insistently resort to animal imagery to highlight moral decadence of their figures and to illustrate the destructive rage pervading their worlds. Through recurrent evocations and allusions, both plays appear like scary ecosystems, full of primitive carnivorous beasts, herbivorous mammals, venomous snakes, dirty pigs as well as of birds of prey and worms.

In *King Lear* and *Lear*, the bestiary functions as prism or barometer to apprehend the psychology of individuals and group dynamics. Bondian and Shakespearan characters perceive themselves and each other, describe their approach to life and their feelings, and determine their level of consciousness through a chart based on typical behaviours of wild, living or legendary animals. For instance, as Lear loses his throne he compares himself to an angry dragon, a supernatural power invented by humans. As the Leviathan of the Nation-State, he considers he has the authority to spit fire on anyone who gets on his way. He is defeated by flattery and treated like a dog.

With the loss of his power, respectability and mental faculty, Shakepeare's hero ends as a "*ruined piece of nature*" (Shakespeare, 1990:135) symbolically stuck on a devastated moor, and howling out inarticulately his suffering, like a wolf in agony. A mongrel and an eternal underdog, Oswald is beaten up twice. He is as fearful as a goose or a wagtail, dodging the wrath of authorities like Lear and his loyal servants. The duke of Albany is inhabited by a cowish spirit and Gloucester is, in Regan's view, an ingrateful fox. The omnipresent allegorical characterization, like in Jean de La Fontaine's *Les fables* or in Birago Diop's *Les contes d'Amadou Koumba*, convey fundamental moral lessons on human conduct and provide a strong sense of moral rightness and wrongness on stage.

In Bond's *Lear* (1978), the deposed monarch perceives the cruel betrayal of his heiresses as rapacious blood-sucking vultures gnawing at his heart. In the midst of his madness, he tells incoherent tales, parables and riddles, mixing up humans, and real and imaginary talking animals, to evoke the barrenness, waste and terror

of the political jungle that his banished daughters, Fontanelle and Bodice have established:

> No daughters! Where he lives the rain can't be wet or the wind cold and the holes cry out when you're going to tread in them […] The mouse comes out of its a hole and stares. The giant wants to eat the dragon, but the dragon has grapped the carving knife […] My daughters turned a dog out of its kennel because it got fond of its sack. (Bond, 1978: 32-34)

After being overthrown by the new political forces, represented by his daughters and their allies, the Bond's central character, like his Shakespearan counterpart, immerses deeply in the harsh realities of a sociopolitical and economic system he has designed and enforced through propaganda and coersion. Like ordinary subjects under his oppressive regime, the deposed king is subjected to the test of humiliating restrictions - repression, exile, hunger and solitude-, a degrading treatment which gradually leads to his mental confusion. His traumatic experience is, however, salutary as it opens his senses on the system of exploitation and oppression that he and his successors have implemented. Like Prince Arthur in *Early Morning* (1968) or the homeless hermit, Evans, in *The Sea* (1973), he detaches himself from mainstream society and becomes a radical voice against the vampiristic socioeconomic practices in his kingdom. His chilling parables inspire terror not only to humans but also to animals. Fantastic elements of inner and external darkness, of cannibalism, death and absolute horror, are overwhelmingly constant in his testimonies:

> It is night. My daughters empty their prisons and feed the men to the dead in their graveyards. The wolves crawl away in terror and hide with the rats. Hup, prince! Hup, rebel! Do tricks for human flesh! When the dead have eaten they go home to their pits and sleep (Bond, 1978: 34)

As he explores the complexities of human nature, Shakespeare draws insightful parallels between the physical and mental features of his characters, and those in the animal world[3].The human and the animal worlds in *King Lear* (1608), are represented like two separate interfaces reflecting each other. The surimposition of the images creates a strange myriad of hybrid creatures. Human characteristics dissolve and become hardly recognisable as each human possesses multiple inner and external animal features. On this point, drama critic AC Bradley observes:

> Goneril is a kite: her ingratitude has a serpent's tooth: she has struck her father most serpent-like upon the very heart; her visage is wolfish: she has tied sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture on her father's breast: for her husband she is a gilded serpent: to Gloster her cruelty seems to have fangs of a board. She and Regan are dog-hearted: they are tigers, not daughters: each is an adder to the other: the flesh of each is covered with the fell of a beast. (Houghton, 1990: 231)

He adds:

> As we read, the souls of all the beasts have entered the bodies of these mortals; horrible in their venom, savagery, lust, deceitfulness, sloth, cruelty, filthinness; miserable in their feebleness, nakedness, defencelessness, blindness. (Houghton, 1990: 232)

In Bond's version of *Lear* (1978), the senseless extermination of pigs in a remote and peaceful rural farm is a pivotal shift in the narrative of the play. It is significantly indicative of the advent of a more repressive and corrupt regime, led by Lear's daughters. The extreme brutality of the regime generates collective distress and political instability. The socio-political chaos reaches, however its climax with the peasants' insurrection organised by a working class rebel, Cordelia. Being a collateral victim of the repression, she organises rebellion, under the banners of freedom, and seizes power, with the support of the repressed working classes. However, as soon as she takes the power, she distances herself from her political supporters. To consolidate her authority, and revenge her family for the horrors she and her husband had experienced, Cordelia, in her turn, commits abominable crimes on the deposed royal family as well as on her own social class. The cycle of repression and violence keeps repeating itself.

Much of the sociopolitical tensions in *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear* (1978) are connected and fuelled by a drive to conquer, possess, control and defend territories. States as well as individuals are driven by the necessity to have a vital space exclusively for themselves. Land possession gives privileges, social status, and identity but also generates conflicts and pain. In both plays, the characters, like other territorial species, are actively involved in defending territories, in building or destroying borders, in military or individual fighting for sign-posts and recognition. The conflictual relationships between the kingdoms and individuals in both plays mainly stem from the desire to possess (more) land. When Cordelia in *King Lear* (1608) loses her land inheritage, her suitor the Duke of Burgundy unhesitatingly rejects her. Edmund's tragic rivalry with his brother Edgar has its origins in land heritage. Commenting on the social dynamics in Shakespeare's play, Braker writes:

> In one sense, Lear is about nothing but land, from the love- game at the beginning to the division of the spoils at the end, via, say, the problematics of Edmund's illegitimacy and the way in which both empirical and metaphysical theme is imbricated with the tenure of the land. (Braker, 1993:5)

In the plays of Bond and Shakespeare, the use of maps is highly significant as it charts in details the greed, the low level of consciousness, and the absence of a spiritual compass in the individual and collective journeys of the characters. In Bond's drama, Bodice, for instance, feels utterly trapped in and depressed by the incessant war efforts for more land and power. She bluntly identifies the map as her mental and physical straightjacket (Bond, 1978: 62). Her confusion and

fatigue reverberate on her troops, who feel also exhausted by the absurd wars and sacrifices they are forced to make. Like their despairing royal authority, they also get, both physically and morally bewildered, using their "*useless bloody map!*" (Bond, 1978: 63). The fulminations among the soldiers and their supreme chiefs give a sense of profound universal lassitude over territorial conflicts in the world of the play.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608), the map the old king uses at the opening of the play materialise the disparities of the resources distribution across the land and among the monarch's heiresses. It reflects the political ambitions and greed of the protagonists in Lear's court and around his kingdom. As Francis Braker comments:

> The map itself is already a field of struggle. It simulates the land in the game of speaking love which Lear stages among his daughters. Despite the tranquil pastoral of Lear's language of the land, it is already the focus of power and danger." (Braker, 1993: 3).

Tony Coult also points out that the map displays an entire set of of social conflicts, reinforcing the territorial nature of the war and joining a series of images that highlight the contrast between the land as a natural habitat, an open living space, and the land as a waste, unfarmed battleground (Coult, 1977: 85).

In their blind pursuit of political and material privileges, Bondian and Shakespearan heroes find themselves stuck in purgatory-like worlds, expiating their immoral trangressions through intense moral suffering. The grief they experience is paradoxically, both, paralysing and salutary in the sense that it causes profound distress and becomes a source of growth and rebirth.

3. Moral and Political Awakening

The narratives of *King Lear* (1608) and *Lear* (1978) are saturated with bitterness and grief. Political leaders, like the subjects at the bottom of the social ladder, are not spared by the tragic incidents that keep escalating from one scene to the other. In the face of adversity and misfortunes, the plays' characters walk, in solitude and in the darkness of their existence, on a non-linear path of spiritual transformation. As they strive to make sense of their fragmented essence and navigate their world, they embark on a journey of self-discovery, and of individual and collective reconstruction.

The opening scenes of *King Lear* (1608), like in Bond's *Lear* (1978), presents an old ego-centered authoritarian at the twilight of a long reign. The central eponymous character in both plays is about to exit the political arena but is still at the centre of his world. His orders have always been met with diligence and obedience. But with his advanced age, and his declining physical, mental and political powers,

he feels his time is running out: the political perspective of his kingdom looks rather uncertain and grim: internal dissidence and risks of external invasion are vital threats to his authority and regime. As he senses that his authority is slipping away, he becomes increasingly impatient, restless and irascible. He tends to make irrational and unpredictable decisions, which plunge the kingdom into confusion and instability.

In Bond's version of *Lear* (1978), the king's incontrollable despair is highlighted, at the outset of the play, when the king and his court visit the most important construction project in the kingdom. They run into a work accident. After a grotesque trial parody, he hurriedly executes the worker who is thought to be responsible for the accidental death. The rushed execution of the second worker, in Lear's mind, is not intended to do justice to the dead innocent worked but to put more pressure on his building teams and administration to speed up the construction of his security wall. This incident is perceived by the oppressed subjects like a wake-up call to rebellion. They also feel encouraged by Bodice's public statement "*If the king will not act reasonably it's your legal duty to disobey them*" (Bond, 1978:20). The subsequent the outbreak of civil war and deposition of the king mark the hero's descent into madness and the beginning of his painful educational journey.

The existential trajectories of the main heroes of Shakespeare and Bond are, to large extent, similar and interchangeable. Each completes, in a way, the other. In *King Lear* (1608), the deposed monarch depicts himself as "*poor old man, / As full of grief as age; wretched in both!*" (Shakespeare, 1990:87). In fact, through his experience of dispossession and grief, he learns and discovers the real nature of humans. As he loses his material wealth, his family ties, his authority and vanity, and faces the rigorous hostility of the elements, he starts listening to his pain and gradually views his tragic experience as a guiding thread or an inner compass to light and wisdom. It becomes, in other terms, the trigger that enables him to develop his emotional intelligence, and better understand human motivations and social dynamics. Realising that, throughout his existence, he has been subtly forced to wear a pair of blinkers, which literally limit his perception of the world and how he lives in it, he becomes "*as mad as the vex'd sea*" (Shakespeare, 1990:127). He gets angry with himself for being so naive and lured into a distorted sense of reality: "*They flatter'd me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there?*" and adds bitterly: "(…) *they are not men o' their words: they told me I was everything: 'tis a lie, I'm not ague-proof*" (Shakespeare, 1990:134). Part of moral development of the sovereign in both plays is his ability to perceive the horrors perpetrated around him and his acknowledgement of his own responsibility for the suffering he has caused to his family and subjects. By the end of his dramatic existence, his personal transformation is almost complete. He

has learned to be humble enough to ask for forgiveness for his immature and immoral behaviour towards his family as well as his countrymen. The corrupt education he has given to his daughters and his tyrannical leadership has certainly shaped the lives of the people under his moral and political authority. For the very last part of his existence, he is bound to carry, in his heart and mind, a stifling burden of regrets. In Bond's *Lear (1978)*, the old and pitiful monarch expresses his wish to go back in time and start all over again:

> I knew nothing, saw nothing, learned nothing! Fool! Fool! (…) And now I must begin again. I must walk through my life step by 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! (Bond, 1978:74)

Contrarily to Shakespeare's Lear who, like the caged bird in Bond's play, seems to be irremediably trapped behind the bars of grief, with no strength or possibility to find a way out and take action, the Bondian character rejects fatalism and strives actively, at the cost of his own life, to confront the tyrannical forces in his kingdom. His priority is to raise collective moral and political awareness to address the issues that corrupt his society. Clearly comprehending that "*Une idée fausse tue davantage que pestes et famines*"[3] (Bond, 2000:153), Bond's Lear seeks to deconstruct the foundations of the belief systems, ideologies, attitudes, and sociopolitical institutions that hinder the development of the universal consciousness and the establishment of global social justice. To raise awareness and create a peaceful, free and fair society, he turns into a radical human rights activist, conscientious objector, youth adviser, storyteller and protector of the oppressed. The political convictions and moral posture that Lear embodies at the very end of existence, are in line with those of Edward Bond. The author of *Lear* (1978) explains:

> Quand une société est injuste, il n'y a pas de liberté ; tout le monde se trouve pris dans un ghetto de pauvreté, de peur, de colère, d'insolence, de sentimentalité – en un mot, de danger. Dans ce ghetto il est plus difficile de comprendre que de ressentir. D'où un cocktail fatal, d'émotions et de méprises et c'est cela qui mène à la violence, au vol, voire au meurtre. (Bond, 2000:117) (My translation: "When a society is unjust, there is no freedom: everyone is trapped in a ghetto of poverty, fear, anger, insolence, sentimentality - in a word, danger. In this ghetto it's harder to understand than to feel. The result is a fatal cocktail of emotions and misunderstandings that leads to violence, theft and even murder.")

Despite his blindness and advanced physical degradation, Bond's Lear finds the energy to organises a camp for refugees, which grows and turns progessively into a nonviolence island, an embryonic community, similar to ecovillages, an alternative microcosm governed by compassion and mutual assistance. They host forced labour and war survivors, and share limited food resources, their griefs, fears and aspirations for a peaceful and just world. The brutal destruction of the rural haven of peace, by Cordelia's armed forces, takes Lear's anger and despair to a climax but it does not affect his resolution to oppose the tyrannical

forces as they spread their tentacles over the land and crush aspiration for change. Lear, whose rigid and uncompromising mindset may be viewed as another form of madness, commits a suicidal act of defiance at the very end of his dramatic existence: his final decision to pull down the great defence wall which he initiated and has become a core state project of the incumbent fascist regime, seems futile but conveys an important symbolic weight as Mangan highlights:

> Lear's last action is one of both destruction and self-destruction: he dies mounting a lone assault on the wall which he himself started to build. The hopelessness of the action is clear, yet the gesture is an optimistic one. His attack on the wall shows hims taking responsibility for the culture of death which he created and which Cordelia can only perpetuate. (…) Bond's Lear dies performing a gesture is simultaneously personal and political. (Mangan, 1998: 28).

The processes of personal growth and social change are not straightforward and not always positive experiences. In real life or in the fictional worlds of Shakespeare and Bond's plays, inner and outer journeys move in circles and often take unexpected directions. It is fascinating to observe that, while Bond's Lear strives to reconnect with his authentic self and to educate and free the consciousness of ordinary subjects as well as the leaders of his kingdom, his mask of insanity passes to others. The wave of negative energy the sovereign unleashed while in power, far from dissipating after his personal conversion, keeps expanding, fuelling resentment among its victims. It becomes a dominant influence in the kingdom as the tragic destinies of Cordelia and her husband illustrate:

> The fearful, sobbing wife of Act I becomes an effective rebel organiser in in Act II and an idealistically motivated tyrant in Act III. The boy who offers bread to Lear in Act I suggests that he poison the well in Act III. The lover of Act I bears little resemblance to the leader of the guerrilla warfare and high offical of Cordelia's regime later in the play. (Spencer, 1992: 90)

The dramatic existence of Cordelia shifts abruptly from complete innocence to extreme cruelty. As the daughter of a priest, she marries an illitterate farmer despite the opposition of her father and leads her idyllic life on a peaceful farm which will be destroyed by armed forces. Her husband is killed and she is raped by soldiers despite her advanced pregnancy. She takes the guerrilla leadership, leads the oppressed rural population to victory. The regime of exploitation and oppression she implements is far more ruthless than those of her predecessors. By her family origins, political trajectory and rule, Cordelia has much in common with Stalin. Through the dictatorial drifts of Cordelia's revolution, Bond, a socialist writer, sought to distance himself from both Stalinism and capitalism:

> I made Cordelia the daughter of a priest because Stalin was trained as a seminarist. I think that even with Stalinism socialism is better than capitalism because capitalism degenerates in fascism. (Hirst, 1985:140)

Cordelia, in the second part of her dramatic existence, and her husband, the Gravedigger's Boy -who appears mostly on stage as a ghost- incarnate the rebirth of Lear's destructive sociopolitical heritage. Their madness resides in their obstination to perpetrate a society that breeds fear and feeds on it.

King Lear (1608) and *Lear* (1978) consistently demonstrate that sociopolitical leadership and institutions that disregard moral and ethical considerations are bound to collapse and generate chaos. Both plays are structured around cyclical scenes of absurd political violence and madness. If Shakespeare's tragedy offers a powerful exploration of the collective suffering of its heroes, it fails to pinpoint a clear way out of the political and crisis it dramatises. In reaction to his predecessor's treatment of the subject, Bond attempts to embark his spectators on a consciousness-raising exercise through a captivating combination of a descriptive and prescriptive approach in the architectural design of his play.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore the nature of politics and the madness of politicians in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1608) and Edward Bond's *Lear* (1978). Their plays are compelling journeys into pre-Christian and contemporary English societies. The irrational and burtal worlds that the playwrights immerse their respective audiences into, are characterized by chaos which results from lack of moral insight and compassion.

This analysis establishes that the moral darkness prevailing in their dramatic worlds is underscored not only, by the symbolic convulsions of the natural elements and the fusion of animal and human conducts but also by the characters' inability to apprehend their own realities and foresee the consequences of their actions. Their political and moral blindness, which is also symbolised by blinding of Lear in Bond's eponymous play and of Gloucester in Shakespare's *King Lear* (1608) is bound to lead to escalating paranoia and social disorder.

Several key ideas emerge as results. Firstly, the plays skillfully highlight the fragility of political power, and the destructive force of regimes with no imagination and perspective. The ideologies behind the decisions to partition the kingdom in *King Lear* (1608) or to construct a high secrutity wall around the realm in *Lear* (1978) for public good paradoxically provokes profound social confusion and unrest, and catalyse the downfall of the institutions and of the architects of the tyrannical regimes.

Secondly, recurrent images of ignorance, oppression, decadence and insanity overwhelm the stages of King Lear and Lear. Both tragedies have similar themes and structures. The fundamental divergence between the plays resides in their

dramatic treatment of politics: Shakespeare's approach to politics in his drama remains, in the words of Leggatt, "exploratory rather than prescriptive" (Leggatt, 1988: 238). The tone of his play is despairingly grim and cynical. Beyond the gripping depiction of the characters'bitter physical, mental and moral experiences, Shakespeare's play offers no clear perspective or way out to individual and collective redemption. In this regard, *King Lear* (1608) can be seriously viewed, despite its particular historical and litterary context, as basement of the theatre of the absurd.

Thirdly, Shakespeare's characters in *King Lear* (1608) tend to regard cosmic influences as the cause and consequence of the social chaos they live in. Their belief systems put emphasis on serving an oppressive order and authority and on the capacity to endure extreme hardships as they passively navigate the complexities of their social relationships in a meaningless world. The tragic existence and death of Shakespearean central character do not convey a significant political purpose whereas Bond's embodies hard-learned abilty to consciously reshape his own personality, reconnect with his spiritual centre and stand for social transformation and common good.

Endnotes

A. a) References to this play in this article are from Ralph Houghton's Oxford edition (1990).

b) Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear* was first performed on 26 December 1606. When the play was produced, the Anglo- Spanish war had just ended, with colossal human and economic losses. The English was, at the same time, facing internal socio-political and religious upheavals, which reached its climax with the Gun Powder Plot and its appalling series of assassinations, executions and mutilations: "slitting of nostrils, cutting off of hands and ears ears, branding, beheading, burning at the stake" were commonplace signatures of the era (Maline and al. Ediors, 1949). The state of confusion and instabilitity in the kingdom was to deteriorate even further with the significant outbreak of the bubonic plague in the slums of London.

Over a century later, the play was banned from England's stages during the reign of King George III (1760-1820), an ageing ruler who, like Shakespeare's hero, suffered from severe mental disorders. He died blind and deaf. It is reported that his reading of Shakespeare's tragedy had worsened his sickeness. The play was censored out of respect for the monarch.

B. Edward Bond's *Lear* was premiered on 29 September 1971 at Royal Court Theatre in London and published a year later by Eyre Methuen Ltd. It was

revised in 1978. In this article, references to the play are based on the 1978 edition.

C. "*A misconception kills more than plagues and famines*" (My translation)

Bibliography

Alexander, P. (1992), *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, London, HarperCollins.

Bond, E. (1978), *Lear* in *Plays: Two*, London, Methuen.

---------- (2000), *La trame cachée*, Paris, Arche.

---------- **(**1976) *The Fool. Scenes of Bread and Love* in *Plays: Three,* London, Methuen.

Braker, F. (1993), *The Culture of Violence*, Manchester University Press.

Coult, T. (1977), *The Plays of Edward Bond,* London, Methuen.

Durant, W. (1961) *The Story of Philosophy*, New York, Touchtone.

Desmond, M. (1970) *Le Zoo humain*, Paris, Grasset.

Hay, M. and Roberts, P. (1978), *Edward Bond a Companion to the Plays*, London, TQ Publications.

Hirst, D. L. (1985), *Edward Bond*, London, Macmillan.

Hodgson, T. (1992), *Modern Drama from Ibsen to Fugard*, London, Batsford.

Houghton, R. E.C. (editor, 1990) *The New Clarendon Shakespeare King Lear,* Oxford, Oxford University Press**,** (first published 1608).

Lappin, L. (1987) *The Art and Politics of Edward Bond*, New York, Peter Lang.

Landré, G. (1965), 'Préface et notices', *Shakespeare Titus Andronicus- Jules César- Antoine et Cléopâtre- Coriolan,* Paris, Flammarion.

Leggatt, A. (1988), *Shakespeare's Political Drama*, London and New York, Routledge.

Maline, J. L. and al. (Editors, 1949), *Prose and Poetry of England*, New York, The L. W. Singer Co. Inc.

Mangan, M. (1998), *Edward Bond*, Northcote House Publishers Ltd, Plymouth.

Maté, G. and Maté, D. (2022), *The Myth of Normal*, London, Vermilion.

Mossé, C., (1999) *Guerres et sociétés dans les mondes grecs de 490 à 322 avant J.-C*, Paris, Editions Jacques Marseilles.

Roberts, P. (1985), Editor. *Bond on File*, London, Methuen.

Scharine, R. (1976) *The Plays of Edward Bond*, London, Associated Press.

Spencer, J. S. (1992), *Dramatic Strategies in the Plays of Edward Bond*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Temkine, R. (1987), *Le théâtre au présent*, Paris, Contraste.

Worth, K. J. (1972), *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*, London, Bell & Sons.