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Aestheticized Violence and the 'Amorous Catastrophe': The Expression of Love in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.

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I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever. (Barthes 48-49)

Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* similarly utilise violence as a device to explore how love is expressed amid brutality, its perseverance and endurability, as well as what is lost in its pursuit and protection. Carney astutely identifies that *Cleansed* seems to be a 'deliberate aestheticization of violence and the dismemberment of the human body with the goal of articulating a highly coherent and deeply tragic message about the indestructibility of love' (288), and it is on this inseparable dynamic that this essay will base its exploration. Each play operates within different generic frameworks, with Kane leveraging the sensationalist and experiential qualities of 'in-yer-face theatre' and Osborne operating within 'kitchen sink' realism, but both plays conjure extreme conditions in which love is tried and tested, reminiscent of Roland Barthes' 'amorous catastrophe' (48). *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* builds upon this notion of aestheticized violence, mediating that

> The amorous catastrophe may be close to what has been called, in the psychotic domain, an extreme situation, "a situation experienced by the subject as irremediately bound to destroy him"; the image is drawn from what occurred at Dachau. Is it not indecent to compare the situation of a love-sick subject to that of an inmate of Dachau? Can one of the most unimaginable insults of History be compared with a trivial, childish, sophisticated, obscure incident occurring to a comfortable subject who is merely the victim of his own Image-repertoire? Yet these two situations: situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever. (48-49)

Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* utilises the romantic relationships between Jimmy and Alison and Jimmy and Helena to present love as a highly emotive site of struggle. Jimmy's

personal philosophy on love is founded on its fundamental conditionality; more importantly, Jimmy wishes for his romantic partners to experience suffering to better appreciate love. To him, love is best encapsulated as a 'dirtying up [of] your hands'; an environment that 'takes muscles and guts' (Osborne 100) to survive. Jimmy in turn begins to engender tumultuous conflict within the domestic setting in order to fabricate Barthes' 'extreme situation' (48). Jimmy repetitively berates Alison and his charged rhetoric is often underscored by a potent misogyny. Jimmy warns Helena that he possesses 'no public school scruples about hitting girls' (Osborne 58) and this threat of gendered physical violence is materialised in the play, namely in his deliberate pushing of Alison into the ironing board as a response to his insatiable desire for her. The threat of proliferating violence in this enclosed domestic space is identified by other characters who note how destructive it is. As a spectator to the violence, Cliff notes how their dynamic has 'always been a battlefield' (61) and Helena implores Alison that if she doesn't soon leave then 'he *will* kill you' (46). Sierz suggests that Osborne utilises the claustrophobia of the cramped living space to transform it into a 'crucible of desire' (31), an intensified inescapability characteristic of the extreme conditions of the amorous catastrophe.

Comyn's 2018 Gate Theatre production of *Look Back in Anger* embarks on an ambitious deconstruction of the distinction between love as an act of struggle and that of an abusive marriage. Comyn's production was the first play to be staged at the Gate Theatre following sexual harassment allegations against its former artistic director (McCormack, "Review") and the convergence of the play's staging with this contextual meaning engendered a new staging of feminist anger in Osborne's play. Quigley identifies how the directorial decision to read the stage directions aloud to the audience in turn creates a palpable tension within the domestic cycle of the romantic relationship of Jimmy and Alison. Drawing upon the example of the stage direction *'they kiss passionately'* (Osborne 31) in Act

1, Quigley details how Comyn's Alison refuses to perform the instruction, 'indicating some sort of resistance between the text and its production' (40). The problematic toxicity of Jimmy and Alison's romantic love is made abundantly clear when the stage directions become unstageable from 'a psychological and contextual impossibility' (44).

Violence is either motivated by or endured because of love in both *Cleansed* and *Look Back in Anger*. Much like Alison's endurance of the abuse from her husband, Kane heightens the 'psychotic domain' (Barthes 48) in *Cleansed*. Kane explicitly notes that her work is fundamentally about 'distressing things which we'd like to think we would survive. If people can still love after that, then love is the most powerful thing' (Kane qtd. in Sierz 116). Kane meditates on the influence of Barthes' work on *Cleansed*, using the theatrical medium to explore the experience of love being likened to serving as an 'inmate of Dachau' (Barthes, 49), in turn recreating her staging to that of a Nazi concentration camp (Ravenhill, "The beauty of brutality."). Violence is instigated in *Cleansed* through Tinker as well as the system in which he both inhabits and, in some capacity, himself directs. Declarative expressions of love provoke violent reactions from Tinker and, in an attempt to obliterate all existent love in the play, he in turn tests the boundaries of unconditional love in others. Tinker dismembers Carl in an attempt to stifle his ability to express love, he forces Robin to eat a box of chocolates intended for Grace in one sitting, before ultimately forcing gender-reassignment surgery on both Carl and Grace. The theatrical mode inevitably draws attention to the corporeality of the actor and the materiality of violence done towards an actual body on stage. Despite the impossibility of a number of the more gruesome stage directions, 'something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion' (Bert qtd. in Quigley 59); we are asked to 'engage with the paradox that the character's body is injured or destroyed, while the body of the actor (we presume and hope) remains intact' (59). The audience remain cognizant of this dynamic in Robin's torture as they sit in real time watching the actor physically force down a

sickening quantity of chocolate. As such, the extremity of the character's suffering in *Cleansed* is made palpable for the audience, as reinforced by the spatial intimacy of the theatre and the proximity to this violence.

Ironically, like Jimmy, Tinker seeks intimacy for himself but ultimately inflicts violence through a reciprocal process of repression and projection. Whereas Jimmy displaces his political and personal anger onto his personal relationships, De Vos describes the character of Tinker as 'a magnificent example of repression in contemporary drama' (92) and this is best manifested in the projection of his desire for Grace onto the Woman. Tinker repetitively conflates the two women, declaring 'I love you, Grace' to the Woman (Kane 42) who in turn assumes her identity. Ironically, following the declaration of love from the Woman in scene fourteen, the violence that Tinker inflicts on others proliferates. The quick succession of violence that follows is woven into Kane's structure and these isolated fragments of experience cumulatively create a disorientating state of frenzied violence. Despite ostensibly craving this form of emotional intimacy, Christoffersen identifies this reaction as a form of overcompensation from Tinker out of a greater drive to protect himself from 'losing his position in the social hierarchy' (34). Consequently, Tinker represses the love not just of the other characters, but also for himself, a state-of-being made actively inhospitable in the extreme conditions in which they exist.

The extremity of such violent reactions is encapsulated in Katie Mitchell's 2016 production of *Cleansed* for the National Theatre. Mitchell made the directorial decision to situate the play in 'the genre of surrealism as opposed to naturalism' (Sidi 53), but to have the physical and sexual violence on stage be as 'exceptionally realistic' (53) as possible. The play-text is explicit with the violence of the stage directions and, within the limitations of staging the unstageable, Mitchell attempts to match this level of realism. In Mitchell's production, scenes of Carl's dismemberment were reproduced through the Voice's meticulous

delivery, in which Carl's hands and feet were both forced into a machine and his maimed appendages were withdrawn. The sound design's unrelenting soundscape of the whizzing machine, Carl's screams, and the combination of 'sirens and music with sounds of a war taking place on the outside of the building' (Sidi 54) create a claustrophobic cacophony to backdrop the inescapable violence. However, specific stage directions, such as when the '*rats carry Carl's feet away*' (Kane 30), required a more stylistic and symbolic reproduction in which 'the impossibilities [Kane] has created are embraced in the same spirit in which she has embraced the impossibilities of love in the play' (Quigley 64).

Both *Cleansed* and *Look Back in Anger* diametrically oppose this violent manifestation of love with a gentler form, but this is ultimately superseded by the implication that love is only truly manifested when associated with extreme pain and suffering. To Alison, Cliff exacts a 'relaxed, cheerful sort of thing' rather than a 'consuming passion' (Osborne 40) like that with Jimmy: '*If Jimmy alienates love, Cliff seems to exact it'* (2). Robin also exhibits a gentle expression of love, a youthful sensitivity in which he buys Grace chocolates, promises not to hurt her, and who loves so boundlessly that his devotion to stay with her supersedes his desire to leave the torturous facility. Despite such a declaration of tender love, Grace remains steadfast in her desire for Graham. As Grace is raped for having '[had] it off with her brother' (Kane 25), Graham *'holds her head between his hands'* (26) as daffodils 'burst upward' from the stage itself. Juxtaposed to the brutal rape presented on stage, these daffodils are an ironic symbol of love physically and metaphorically breaking through and enduring the extreme conditions.

Carl's endurance of love not only speaks to its immutability, but also to the question of how love is expressed, where violence is placed and what has been removed as a result. Kane charts the decline of the human body with the progression of the play, namely that of Carl who becomes subject to prolonged mutilation. Tinker cuts off Carl's tongue, hands, and

feet, as well as subjugating him to genital mutilation. Carl is ultimately stripped of his ability to express love verbally, physically, and sexually but, despite this, Tinker fails in his aim to annihilate love between the couple. Unable to speak or continue in '*a dance of love for Rod'* (Kane 30), Rod reaffirms his love for Carl by wearing for himself the remnant ring left on Carl's severed hand, an act of defiance against the repressive forces around them. Eventually swallowing both rings, these symbols of their enduring love are united again in his body. Greater than the physical loss of his limbs, Carl endures a metaphorical dismemberment from his sense of self, becoming trapped inside his own body for the sake of love from the lover that he inevitably loses. The force in which Carl projects himself into the expression of his love is reminiscent of Barthes' conjecture that in the amorous catastrophe 'without the other I cannot recover myself' (49). Similarly, Grace obliterates her own identity in search of her brother's love. Graham cannot return Grace's love directly, so she gradually loses herself in the attempt to have 'Graham outside like Graham inside' (Kane 20). This utterance, paired with the genital transplantation that obliterates Grace's personhood into that of Grace/Graham, reflects the moment in which she 'irrevocably runs toward her disappearing as a subject' (Christoffersen 19). Kane nods to Barthes' sentiment as she describes that 'when you love obsessively, you lose your sense of self. And if you lose the object of your love … [it] can completely destroy you' (qtd. in Sierz 116).

Look Back in Anger also encapsulates the destruction of self in the amorous catastrophe, especially in terms of the female subject. In a similar conflation as the character of Grace/Graham, Alison and Helena are made interchangeable in the role of Jimmy's romantic partner. The structural parallels in the opening stage directions of the first and third acts are jarring – both are positioned '*leaning over the ironing board*' (Osborne 78) with the same pile of clothes and each dressed in one of Jimmy's shirts. There is a fluidity in which the women take turns stepping into this role as they disappear and reappear on the stage, each

perhaps losing their identities in the 'psychotic domain' (Barthes 48) of the Porter home. Alison subdues herself in her return to Jimmy, collapsing her selfhood into that of the dehumanised 'beautiful, green-eyed squirrel' (Osborne 32). In light of Jimmy's cruel framework around love, Alison's pain of losing both her husband and unborn child allow her to become 'a recognisable human being' (36) to Jimmy and thereby finally deserving of love. However, the immensity of their shared suffering forces the couple into their established pattern of escapism. Unable to 'bear the pain of being human beings any longer' (46), the pair dehumanise themselves to the level of bears and squirrels, a fantastical form of role-playing that offers the space to revert to the level of 'dumb, uncomplicated affection for each other' (46).

The central question posed around if love can survive the reality of bodily and psychological suffering is answered affirmatively in the final scenes of both *Cleansed* and *Look Back in Anger*. Despite Rod's death, love wins for the couple in this moment of ultimate sacrifice. Rod fulfils his promise to Carl to 'do [his] best, moment to moment' (Kane 5) and proves that Carl's belief in unconditional love is attainable. The banality of the play's initial universal proclamations, such as 'I'll always love you' (4), is superseded as 'love transcends beyond the utterance, and though a universal phrase cannot demonstrate the individual experience, actions can' (Christoffersen 43). Rebellato best describes *Cleansed* as a play that 'strips romantic love of all its unknowable promises, its claim of eternity, and asks what is left' (qtd. in Christoffersen 280). In the concluding moments of the play, Grace/Graham reaches out to hold Carl's stump, smiling as the '*sun gets brighter and brighter'* (Kane 44). This is a scene of peace for Grace in which her love has conquered all, and what remains is the human connection between the pair, denoted by their physical touch. Whilst Kane's work is infatuated with the ultimate conquest of love, Carl's tears in the final scene raise questions around whether the struggle of the amorous catastrophe is worth such suffering if it's

‘irremediately bound to destroy’ (Barthes 48) the subject. Although love has conquered all, at what cost has survival occurred? The same question is posed to the audience in *Look Back in Anger* regarding each character’s mutilated sense of self in the face of such psychological devastation by the play’s denouement. Those who are not killed in the pursuit or protection of love are left physically mutilated and mentally scarred, detached from their sense of self. As Christoffersen identifies, ‘Grace is left with nothing *but* love’ (25) and the audience are left to ponder whether this is ‘something worth prescribing to anyone’ (25). Perhaps a more accurate reflection on Kane’s work would be to insist that *Cleansed*, as well as other pieces such as *Blasted*, espousing the survival of love, but not on hope for its protection to self-hood or guardianship against violent suffering.

Edward Bond, a sensationalist contemporary of Sarah Kane, meditated on the fundamental need to represent the violent reality of contemporary Britain, noting that ‘violence shapes and obsesses our society’ and that to ‘not want writers to write about violence [would be to] want them to stop writing about us and our time’ (Sellar 31). Serving as ‘provocative in-yer-face antagonists’ (Sierz xii), both Kane and Osborne leverage theatrical possibility to explore the ways in which love is expressed amidst such inescapable violence, indestructibly endurable in its preservation. As an exploratory medium, this avant-garde form of theatre utilises violence as a tool to proliferate the stakes in the human experience of love, in turn articulating a deeply tragic, yet aestheticised, dramatisation of immutable love. To conclude, however, whilst *Cleansed* and *Look Back in Anger* both insist on the endurability of love in the domains of physical and psychological violence, neither retain an auspicious outlook on the value of surviving the devastation caused as a result.

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