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SARAH KANE'S CRUELTY: SUBVERSIVE  
PERFORMANCE AND GENDER

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Bachelor of Arts in English  
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# SARAH KANE'S CRUELTY: SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCE AND GENDER

REBECCA L. DLUBACK

## ABSTRACT

Sarah Kane uses cruelty in her plays *Blasted* and *Cleansed* to shock the audience out of their indifference, which will then allow Kane to subvert gender norms, through performed acts on stage, and the heterosexual patriarchal authority that creates the Other in society. Kane uses the theories of Antonin Artaud and Judith Butler to create a new style that melds these two theories while bringing a fresh take to the theater. Kane was twenty-three when her first play, *Blasted*, opened at the Royal Court Theater Upstairs on January 12, 1995. It was met with hostility by the critics when it first opened, but after the shock had quieted, there were many positive critiques on her plays. Kane used Artaud's manifesto on The Theater of Cruelty to bring the physicality and importance of the image back to the theater. The violence done in her plays is the central action that forces the audience to be a witness to cruelty. Kane shows blatant acts of cruelty on stage in *Blasted*, with the homosexual rape and the sucking out of Ian's eyes, and in *Cleansed*, with Carl and Grace being beaten, Rod and Robin's deaths, and the forced sex change. These actions are used to present gender as culturally constructed and open up the allowance of difference. The gender theory of Butler helps to interpret the way Kane uses gender through Butler's representation of gender as repeated acts performed daily that can be subverted through the repetition of difference. Kane uses the homosexual rape of Ian in *Blasted* and the homosexual love and incest in *Cleansed* to allow the audience to see difference and break down the binary that governs gender.

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# SARAH KANE'S CRUELTY: SUBVERSIVE PERFORMANCE AND GENDER

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The plays of Sarah Kane have never conformed to the traditional rules of Western theater. Images of violence and cruelty flourish in her most notable plays, *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. The heavy use of images and action in these plays is what set Kane apart from the New Drama of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its well-made problem plays, that focused on dialogue. Kane utilized the performance of violence on stage to force the audience to break through the haze of apathy that is created by the media's insensitive portrayal of cruelty. Once this shock of cruelty has broken through the indifference of the audience, Kane is able to subvert gender norms, through performed acts on stage, and the heterosexual patriarchal authority that creates the Other in society. Antonin Artaud's manifesto on *The Theater of Cruelty* is a major influence on Kane, which can be seen through her predilection of image over words and the violence in her plays that she refused to mitigate. The theories of Judith Butler in regard to gender help to illuminate the way that Kane portrayed gender and gender norms in both *Blasted* and *Cleansed*. Kane was able to remake the theory of Artaud to create a drama that forced the audience to confront the cultural construction of gender and open them to a discourse of difference

## CHAPTER II

### CRITICAL HISTORY

Kane's ability to allow difference in gender and dramatic forms was attacked by critics when her first play, *Blasted*, opened at the Royal Court Theater Upstairs on January 12, 1995. Most critics that attended the play reduced it to meaningless violence, only meant to shock and disgust the audience. The literary criticism since the opening of *Blasted* has had a more positive outlook on Kane's plays and many have given reasons for the journalist's initial dismissal of her work. One of the most important problems for the initial critics comes down to the lack of a conventional form in her plays. In his book 'Love me, or kill me' Sarah Kane and the theatre of extremes, Graham Saunders states that, "Sarah Kane in turn saw such reactions by critics as indicative of a refusal to look beyond received dramatic form: 'If they don't have a clear framework in which to locate the play then they can't talk about it'" (41). There could be no clear analysis of the play for the critics because they were trying to pick apart a form that did not exist in *Blasted*. Kane purposefully refused to adhere to the conventional realism play and when the bomb went off critics could not reconcile such a leap from the realist first half to the symbolic second half. Helen Iball echoes Kane's sentiment when she says that "*Blasted's* disordered personality sends practitioners and commentators running for the neat cover of

binary opposition: the verbal versus the visual, theatricality (which is invariably ascribed to the 'visual' camp) as the antithesis of realism" (328). The critics reverted to reviewing the play in the manner that they were accustomed to, meaning they used the conventional form of realism to describe the play, which would not and could not be forced into such a narrow form. The play was seen as theatrical, which equals non-realistic, which in turn means that working in the binary, as Iball suggests, the critics could do no less than say that the play was deficient and not worth exploring. Kim Solga suggests that "*Blasted* is not so much horribly violent as it is violently unpredictable, resisting the kind of audience premonition on which both naturalism and dialectical realism thrive and thus leaving the audience unprepared for what may come and how they might react" (352). In refusing to stage a conventional realistic play, Kane uses the violence and unpredictability to keep the audience engaged in the performance instead of letting them passively watch a scene they have seen again and again. Solga focuses on how the play affects the audience, which was a large part of Kane's focus. The audience must bear witness emotionally and physically to the violent events in the plays, which would not happen if Kane had used a conventional realistic format.

The other major problem for critics, once they had exhausted the form issue, was the violence portrayed on stage without any moral association or instructions on how to process the violence. For Ken Urban in his article "Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the 'Nineties'", the in-yer-face theater that "aligns itself with this cruel undercurrent is invested in social concerns, in issues of life and death" and "what disturbs critics of 'in-yer-face' theatre is that it does so without any moral framework or ideological certainty" (363). This is another example of the critic's inability to deal with



the experimental aspect of Kane's plays. She refuses to give the audience, meaning which they are used to have. This is not a neat play with a boring plot that leads to a moral or philosophical ending. It is a play that is dirty, unpredictable, violent, and without any hint of a comprehensive meaning that would tie it all together. The violence is there to shock the audience but also to ensure that the audience will have no choice but to pay attention and think through the violence in their own way. Kane's refusal to invest her violence with meaning leads to the criticism that it has no meaning, which is plainly incorrect. One such criticism is seen in Sanja Nikcevic's article which states that in-*yer-face* theater offers "violence on an archetypal level as something inherent in us, not as the consequence of a social structure, as a political play would show... There is no escape or possibility of change, because that evil exists on a deeper level" (264). The complication with this interpretation is that it forces not only Kane's plays, but all plays encompassed under the in-*yer-face* camp into the form of a political play when they are clearly not. Nikcevic cannot see that the plays have developed a style outside of the traditional form and have to be interpreted in a new way. Violence is seen as intrinsic, for Nikcevic, and if that is true then there is nothing that can be done to remedy it, but Kane's plays and others in the in-*yer-face* group do not portray evil as within the person, but forced on them by society. There is hope for change in these plays because society and culture can always be changed. Nikcevic goes on to say that "Kane, for example, does not present torture as something abhorrent which needs explanation, but something ordinary and actually justified. In these plays if the victim does not crave it, they deserve it" (269). This argument points to the critic's inability to see Kane's use of violence as a way to reawaken the audience to the cruelty that is prevalent in the world. The brutality done to

Cate by Ian and to Carl by Tinker cannot be seen as Kane implying that they want it or deserve it, unless the critic means to imply that a woman wants to be raped or a homosexual man deserves to be punished.

Such a literary criticism as Nikcevic's is not common in the analysis that has been done on Kane. Her plays have been praised for their use of violence to open up discussions on the way the media portrays news, on gender roles, on the normative influence on non-conformists, and her emphasis on performance. Peter Buse says that "*Blasted* implies that modern Britain is a society where potentially traumatizing events, such as rape and murder, are rendered inconsequential by the constant diet of them provided by the press" (186). Buse is able to see Kane's use of cruelty as a means to acknowledge the trauma that happens to those who are constantly exposed to brutality in society. Busee argues that the soldier reenacting the violence done to him and those he loved is in part a consequence of his own trauma, which he feels compelled to act out over and over again. The soldier is compelled to do this because the media will not acknowledge his suffering. According to Aleks Sierz, *Blasted* is a "play that explores, by means of disturbing sexual and violent images, contemporary issues about war, gender and the media's manipulation of news" (232). Sierz as well argues for the successful use of violence by Kane to reveal what is happening in the world, without the interference of the media. The fact that a twenty-three year old woman made such bold statements in her plays, according to Sierz, was what outraged the middle-aged male journalists, who may have identified with Ian in the play.

The identity of Ian as a diseased male and his relationship to Cate in the beginning of *Blasted* have sparked feminist approaches to Kane's work, even though she

did not want to be categorized as a feminist. Aston quotes Kane in her book titled Feminist Views on the English Stage, as saying, “I don’t want to be a representative of any biological or social group of which I happen to be a member. I am what I am. Not what other people want me to be” (80). Whether or not Kane wanted to be labeled as a feminist or not, the subversion of gender norms is clear in her plays. Aston forces a feminist reading of *Blasted* when she focuses her argument on the masculine/feminine binary, instead of on Kane’s subversion of gender roles. She sees Ian as the unrepressed masculine and Cate as the female victim. Although the first half of the play does conform to the standard of masculine dominance and female submission, Aston glosses over the male rape, which is where Kane breaks down gender roles, and goes straight to Ian being “forced into the passive position of the ‘feminine’” (85). Her interpretation of *Cleansed* focuses more on the breaking down of normative gender roles, but she still states that her argument of the play is “a figurative dismantling of the psychoanalytical framework that endorses and produces ‘a diseased male identity’” (Aston, 90). Although she states this as her argument, she does show that the policing of the Other by Tinkering in the play is a way to keep the “heteronormative gender economy” (Aston, 91) in tact. She goes on to explore the implication of the Other being a threat to destabilizing the system of heterosexual gender roles and the ways that Kane’s marginalized figures refuse to adhere to their respective gender roles even when punished.

## CHAPTER III

### ARTAUD AND KANE

Gender and the way that gendered society acts upon the world are the basis for Kane's plays as Aston points out, but to get at the roots of gender, Kane choose to use the manifesto of Artaud, though in her own way. The problem with the theater for both Artaud and Kane was that it could no longer create awareness in the audience. Artaud states that "it is certain that we need above all a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart" (84). The time of John Osborne and the angry young men that utilized the well-made play was over. These plays could no longer voice the outrage over working conditions and the political structure in England, because the realistic play that reduced life to direct dialogue and props had been consumed by ordinariness. The heat that fueled the rage behind the plays had cooled back into acceptance. Society, Artaud argues, "requires intense and sudden shocks to revive our understandings" (86). Theater, for Artaud, is the only means of art capable of restoring meaning to society because it "disturbs the senses' repose, frees the repressed unconscious" (28), through spectacle, which uses every aspect of the stage. The very fact that drama has an inherent sensual element is exploited in Artaud's vision because it is this sensuality that pushes theater beyond what the other arts could produce when portraying life. The power of theater is

not in the written text, as had been believed, but in the attack on the senses that can bring the audience closer to the performance, and thereby closer to the harshness of the world. This drawing in of the audience sets theater apart from the other arts, but also from film and television. It is the physicality of the theater that causes the audience to be encompassed in the performance, which cannot be portrayed on a screen. It is physical bodies moving, speaking, and feeling that makes the theater so powerful. Artaud wants to exploit the senses in the theater because theater is the only medium that has this ability to attack all of the senses, instead of one or two. Artaud would eliminate the author in favor of the director, which means eliminating text in favor of production. It is through the vibrations, sounds, lights, and other visual effects that the audience is able to believe that they are a part of the drama instead of an outside observer.

What would draw the audience in, according to Artaud, is a new concrete language and this language would not have words at its core. “It consists of everything that occupies the stage, everything that can be manifested and expressed materially on a stage and that is addressed first of all to the senses instead of being addressed primarily to the mind as is the language of words” (Artaud, 38). The new theater would be a theater of performance, which uses “music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery” (Artaud, 39). Spoken language is not banished from Artaud’s stage, but is used for its effect on the senses; the music of spoken language would be yet another assault on the audience instead of evoking meaning through the intellect. Artaud would resort to mass spectacle to drag the audience into the concrete language performed on the stage. “On this principle we envisage producing a spectacle where these means of direct action are used in their

totality; a spectacle unafraid of going as far as necessary in the exploration of our nervous sensibility” (Artaud, 87). There are very specific directions in the manifesto for constructing mass spectacle. The stage itself will disappear to be replaced with the audience in the middle of the room with the action taking place all around them. In place of life-like sets, there will be “hieroglyphic characters, ritual costumes, manikins ten feet high representing the beard of King Lear in the storm, musical instruments tall as men, objects of unknown shape and purpose” (Artaud, 98). Through the spectacle of concrete language, Artaud would establish a “direct communication...between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator...is engulfed and physically affected” (96). Spectacle can only create this direct communication with the audience when it is based on a believable reality.

Artaud wants all of life to be recreated on stage and for Artaud, “everything that acts is a cruelty” (85), which suggests that to recreate life on the stage, one must recreate cruelty. Artaud defines cruelty as, “this rigor, this life that exceeds all bounds and is exercised in the torture and trampling down of everything, this pure implacable feeling is what cruelty is” (114). Mass spectacle is achieved through the performance of cruelty on the stage. The spectator cannot help but be awakened to reality by actors performing violence and brutality in a way that assaults all their senses physically. The Theater of Cruelty “releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not...of the theater, but of life” (Artaud, 31). The Theater of Cruelty does not limit life, as words do, but shows all aspects of life without apology. It is only through this spectacle of cruelty that impels “men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the

slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world” (Artaud, 31). It is through the action and image of the theater that the lofty ideals of abstract words fade away, leaving the audience with a sense of truthful reality. Once this revival of awareness is complete, Artaud deifies the “spectator to give himself up, once outside the theater, to ideas of war, riot, and blatant murder” (82).

Kane may or may not subscribe to the power of theater to deter violence in society, as Artaud suggests, but through her plays there is proof that she does believe in the power of images on the stage to shock the audience into feeling. Kane is even quoted as saying, “If I was going to rewrite [*Blasted*] I’d try the purifying of images even more, and I’d cut even more words out if such a thing is possible, because for me the language of the theatre is image” (Sanders, 50). The reference to images as the language of the theater strongly points to her own interpretation of the manifesto of Artaud. Kane seeks to find a balance between the audience’s dependence on dialogue and her own sense of image as a means to bring the audience a new kind of understanding, one that appeals to the very center of a person’s emotion so that feeling cannot be suppressed but is driven to the forefront. Elaine Aston states that, “Kane considered that contact with ‘art’/theatre could bring about change, this meant that she worked with a view of theatre having a post-theatrical sequel: a reawakening of perception, an invitation to see differently” (83). The images in Kane’s plays are not only an invitation, but a command to see differently because they are so violent. Kane wants the audience to experience rape, torture, and murder, not as a casual observer protected by the fourth wall, but as a witness to the cruelty in society.

Cruelty begins in *Blasted* with the relationship between Ian, the dominant diseased male, and Cate, the vulnerable innocent female. Ian verbally abuses Cate only seventeen lines into the play.

Ian: Retard, isn't he?  
Cate: No, he's got learning difficulties.  
Ian: Aye. Spaz.  
Cate: No he's not.  
Ian: Glad my son's not a Joey.  
Cate: Don't c- call him that.  
Ian: Your mother I feel sorry for. Two of you like it.

Kane, *Blasted* 5

A game is played by Ian, taking it in turns to be solicitous of Cate's affection and then to degrade her. It is psychological violence that pervades the beginning of the play, which makes Cate all the more vulnerable. Ian cannot conceal his contempt for Cate because of her innocence and her ability to accept life without the feelings of despair that infiltrate his. Ian is intolerant of difference in the people around him, which can be seen through his use of degrading labels such as "wogs" and "nigger". Even Cate is subject to his intolerance when she does not meet his standards of womanly attire. "Ian: Don't like your clothes. / Cate: (*Looks down at her clothes*). Ian: You look like a lesbos. / Cate: What's that? / Ian: Don't look very sexy, that's all" (Kane, *Blasted* 7). The abuse is used by Kane to show Ian's feelings of superiority over Cate and the Other. He sees himself as smarter, worldlier, and entitled to be in control because of his ability to conform. Kane does not allow him to keep his control when Cate has her first fit, which is brought on by Ian's emotional cruelty, when he calls Cate stupid and deliberately continues to put her down. The problem for Ian is that Cate totally breaks with reality, leaving Ian with the confusion and fear that he was trying so intently to impose on her. Kane shows that emotional violence can be just as destructive as physical violence and this is done as



another means to separate the audience from passivity. The emotional torment continues, even after the fit, because Ian is without feeling for what Cate wants. He simply does not care. Kane makes sure that Cate states explicitly that she does not want to sleep with him and she does this more than once. “Cate: Ian, d-don’t. / Ian: What? / Cate: I don’t w-want to do this. / Ian: Yes you do. / Cate: I don’t” (Kane, *Blasted* 14). The domestic violence ends in Cate’s offstage rape by Ian. Brutality, so far, has been kept within the realm of the domestic, including the rape, which may be thought of as expected, but Kane portrays this brutality without lessening the blow for the audience. Ian’s attacks on Cate are very physical and disturbing in and of themselves. Kane may have let the rape occur offstage, but there are acts of sexual violence done to Cate that are seen on the stage. “**Ian**, *apparently still in pain, takes her hand and grasps it around his penis, keeping his own hand over the top. Like this, he masturbates until he comes....*” (Kane, *Blasted* 15). This domestic cruelty between Ian and Cate foreshadows the civil war that spills into their hotel room.

Once the soldier from the war enters the room, the dynamic of the violence has changed and the intensity heightened, but the soldier still identified himself with Ian. They are both killers because violence is bred at home. Indifference also seems to be bred at home. Ian is a journalist but will not write about the experiences of the soldier because “[n]o one’s interested” (Kane, *Blasted* 47). Ian writes stories not news. Stories are the tamed versions of the actual events that happened and to Ian no one would want the news of the soldier’s life because no one is interested in the truth. Kane shows that the audience has been kept safe by the media, because there is nothing in a news story to shock. Ian’s story to his newspaper is told through the telephone with grammatical

indifference, as if Ian is bored telling yet another murder story. “Each had been stabbed more than twenty times and placed face down comma, hands bound behind their backs point new par.” (Kane, *Blasted* 12). Kane shows how the media takes the horror out of a brutal murder, through Ian’s detached reporting. The soldier makes the violence he has suffered and inflicted on others personal to both Ian and the audience.

The soldier has feelings of sorrow and shame for the things that he has done and witnessed and he tries to share these with Ian, who still cannot feel them. Once it is clear that Ian cannot be stirred by the soldier’s words, Kane commences with the violence that will shock both Ian and the audience out of their stupor. “*He pulls down Ian’s trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling Ian’s hair*” (Kane, *Blasted* 49). Kane uses this homosexual rape and the emotion that the soldier feels while doing it to penetrate the defenses that society has constructed against feeling the horrors in our world. Rape and murder are expected in a soldier as long as it is against the enemy. Kane shows that these things are not only expected, but encouraged because once the soldier is home he’s “clean. Like it never happened” (Kane, *Blasted* 48). War requires many things from a soldier, but they are acceptable to society because they are not brought home with the soldiers. Kane rejects this by bringing war to a hotel room in Leeds and has this accepted violence happen to one of their own, a Welsh journalist. There can be no distance put between what goes on in war and what could and does happen in every day life because Kane has brought the two together in a collision that is meant to jar the audience enough to make them start thinking about the consequences of violence. Even after the violence has been inflicted on him, Ian cannot stop thinking about himself instead. He asked if the soldier will kill him and the soldier’s reply is that

he “*puts his mouth over one of Ian’s eyes, sucks it out, bites it off and eats it. / He does the same to the other eye*” (Kane, *Blasted*, 50). Ian could never see beyond his own needs and so Kane takes away his physical ability to see; leaving him helpless as never before.

The capability of Kane to make the horror of violence so immediate to the audience is what links her to Artaud. Images are what hold the key to reaching the audience for both Artaud and Kane. Details are seen through the stage directions and the dialogue, which is short and to the point through the entire play. Kane begins by outlining what the room should look like. “*A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world. There is a large double bed. A mini-bar and champagne on ice. A telephone. A large bouquet of flowers*” (Kane, *Blasted* 3). This small detail is enough to let the audience know that they are at home no matter where they are from. The setting is familiar to anyone who has been in a decent hotel room. The violence is all the more surprising when it is set in a place that might be thought of as safe and civilized, which equates to a place that is without conflict or unprovoked brutality. The images are not arbitrary to Kane. She makes use of each and every item that is set on the stage. The double bed is the site of two rapes, while the mini-bar and champagne are used to show Ian’s abuse of alcohol and his attempted seduction of Cate. The phone is a prominent prop when used by Ian as an impersonal way to share his detached news of a murder. Lastly, the flowers begin as a way to pacify, but end up strewn around the room after the rape of Cate. They are symbolic of the progression of the play; it begins normal enough but by the end the whole plot is torn apart. The blast, that tears apart the plot and the rules of the theater, is one of the major

ways that Kane uses images. She gives the audience a sensory overload when a mortar bomb hits the hotel and thereby ends any likeness to a well-made play.

*Cleansed*, on the other hand, does not have a beginning that would resemble a well-made play. In the first scene, the audience is struck by a doctor helping his patient to overdose on heroin. Kane stresses that this is not an ordinary university, when Graham is given the smack by Tinker, and that death and torture are a regular occurrence. Punishment is used as a method of salvation throughout the play. Carl is beaten by an unseen force because of his love for another man, Rod. “*The beating continues methodically until Carl is unconscious. Tinker holds up his arm. The beating stops*” (Kane, *Cleansed* 12). Not only is there a brutal beating shown on stage, but Kane is able to use images to show the power that Tinker possesses. It is his gesture that starts and stops this beating, and only when he says does Carl have any respite. The torture continues psychologically when Tinker explains to Carl what will happen if he does not give up his lover.

Tinker: There’s a vertical passage through your body, a straight line through which an object can pass without immediately kill you. Starts here.  
(*He touches Carl’s anus.*)

Carl: (*Stiffens with fear.*)

Tinker: Can take a pole, push it up here, avoiding all major organs, until it emerges here.  
(*He touches Carl’s right shoulder.*)  
Die eventually of course. From starvation if nothing else gets you first.

Kane, *Cleansed* 12

The threat is not idle, but what Tinker wants from Carl is that fear. It is only in the fear for his life that Tinker can force him to give up the one that he loves and has sworn to die

for. The physical violence is blended with the psychological as Tinker questions Carl about his lover while the pole is being inserted. In the end, Carl is forced to give up his lover as Tinker wants and as payment, Tinker cuts out his tongue. Not only has Carl betrayed his lover and his vow, but Tinker has taken away his means to voice his misery and contrition. The violence continues as Carl loses his hands, feet, and even his genitals to Tinker. This systematic removal of any means for Carl to show his love for Rod is not only about physical brutality, but about the emotional cost of Carl's helplessness. Tinker will not allow Carl to alleviate his guilt or express his love and in so doing brings Carl all the closer to mental despair. These acts of violence are meant to break Carl down so that he can be saved and brought back to social norms. All of these violent punishments are enacted on the stage, drawing the audience in through performance of physical and emotional torture.

The violence is not limited to the homosexual couple, but happens to Grace, who wants to be her dead brother, and a young man, Robin, who is in love with Grace. The degradation begins when Grace insists on wearing Graham's clothing, which have been given to Robin. Tinker gives her what she wants, but at the expense of Robin. Grace orders him to remove his clothes, which he does and is left naked and shivering. He eventually dresses in Grace's discarded clothing, while Grace has put on Graham/Robin's clothes. Kane gives the audience a kind of cruelty that is not physical or even violent because it has no feeling behind it. Robin gets caught in the middle when he is forced to stand naked before them and then put on women's clothing, but even without violence the cruelty can be felt when Robin is treated as a nonentity. Kane furthers the emotional torture when Robin falls in love with Grace, who can't love him back. He draws her a

flower, which Tinker burns, and then buys her a box of chocolates. Tinker cannot allow this kind of kindness to continue. When he finds the box of chocolates, he forces Robin to eat the whole box, one piece at a time, while he sobs. The audience must watch this terror as Kane instructs in the stage directions that each piece is thrown at Robin and then must be eaten. Just when the audience thinks the horror must end, there is another whole row of chocolates that Robin must eat. Again Kane shows the audience a kind of brutality that leaves no visible marks, but goes much deeper. Tinker has shown his authority without raising a hand to Robin, but Robin's distress is palpable. Kane shows through Robin what psychological torture can do to a person. In the end, Robin kills himself while Grace, Graham, and Tinker watch. "**Robin takes off his tights (Grace's) and makes a noose. He gets a chair and stands on it. He attaches the noose to the ceiling and puts his head through**" (Kane, *Cleansed* 40). All three of them watch as Robin pleads with Grace, who does nothing and then the chair is gone and Graham is the only one that will acknowledge Robin. "**Still choking, Robin holds out a hand to Graham. Graham takes it. Then wraps his arms around Robin's legs and pulls. Robin die**" (Kane, *Cleansed* 40). Robin suffers the least of the physical violence, but the emotional torment is just as harmful. Graham, who is beyond Tinker's influence, is the only one who can see Robin and what he needs, even if it is only help in escaping through death.

There is no escape for Grace, because Tinker is set on saving her. A severe beating is the first attempt at salvation for Grace, but it is not Tinker who orchestrates it. It is a group of unseen men, just as with Carl, and it is only the sounds that have physical effects. When beating Carl, it was Tinker that spoke to him and directed the beating, but

with Grace it is the disembodied voices that hurt and rape her. Graham helps her to turn off the pain and be somewhere else in her head, as he used to do when shooting up. He protects her body when the voices try to kill her by shooting her with automatic gunfire that tears up the wall behind them. Once Tinker saw that Grace could not be touched with physical brutality, he must find a new way to remove her unnatural wants. He then turns to ways to readjust the mind. *“An electric current is switched on. **Grace’s** body is thrown into rigid shock as bits of her brain are burnt out”* (Kane, *Cleanse* 31). Tinker goes to the mind to drive out, forcefully with electric currents, the part of Grace that wants to be her brother. Kane shows Grace’s inability to defend herself against Tinker’s form of redemption through the images of many different forms of torture, physical and emotional. Along with everyone else in the University, Kane forces Grace to lose everything at the hands of Tinker. Carl and Grace are given an involuntary sex change operation by Tinker, but what makes this even more gruesome is that she felt it happen.

Violence is prevalent throughout *Cleansed*, but there is still a focus on the images. The setting of a scene is distinct and meaningful. The rooms have a color associated with them, white, green/brown, red, and black, except for the Round Room. Scene Two takes place on the “college green just inside the perimeter fence of the university” (Kane, *Cleansed* 5). The setting creates the image of foliage and the budding of plants. It is in this scene, that the maturation of the love between Carl and Rod is seen. It later becomes a muddy place signifying the change from the sunny love between the homosexual couple and the degradation that Tinker forces on them. This is where Carl and Rod continually try to show affection, but it is literally cut off by Tinker. The Red Room easily foreshadows the rape and beating that is done to Grace during Scene Ten and the

beating of Carl and his betrayal of Rod in Scene Four. The White Room, which is the University Sanatorium, is used as a place for Grace to receive treatment. She changes into Graham's clothing, has sex with her brother, receives electroshock therapy, and finally has her sex change in this room. The Black Room houses the peep show where Tinker goes to find the female side of Grace. Lastly, the Round Room houses the library and is a kind of sanctuary where Grace teaches Robin to read and where they are able to talk to each other. It cannot remain safe and Tinker forces Robin to burn it down using the books with which Grace was teaching him to read. Kane makes the setting an important indicator for the audience, which stimulates the senses and makes the audience more aware of performance of the play.

Performance is an attack on the audience that both Kane and Artaud required for the mass spectacle that would rescue the spectator from indifference. Kane draws on the manifesto of the Theater of Cruelty to bring out the spectacle without resorting to Artaud's vision of the purely sense driven theater. The plays plainly show the impact that Artaud had on Kane, which is most importantly seen through her preference to action over words. Kane made a contribution to Artaud's concrete language by using all that the stage offers; such as her attention to the details of the setting, the violence that is seen directly on the stage, and her short direct dialogue. All of these choices point to her acceptance of the manifesto, but it is plain that she reworks Artaud's theory into her own melding of performance and words. The language used in both *Blasted* and *Cleansed* is direct and strangely clipped, but it still plays a role as words that require the use of the mind, instead used only for the effect they have on the senses. In *Blasted*, Ian says that football is not "fancy footwork and scoring goals. It's tribalism" (Kane, 20). Ian is



making a judgment on a socially sanctioned sport and this cannot be gleaned through the senses but must be thought out. Kane makes a bridge for the audience. She uses new theories that engage the senses, but she also keeps dialogue and some remnants of the theater that comforts the audience. Kane did seek to alienate the audience from convention and platitudes, but not so much that the spectacle would overwhelm the spectator and all understanding of what the play had to offer. There is a standard stage and no emphasis on lighting or music in Kane's stage directions, as Artaud instructed, because she focused on the performance of cruelty to shock the senses into awakening the mind. The medium of theater was the only place that Kane was able to bring cruelty so close to the audience because she made them a witness to brutality through the physicality of the theater. The audience is seeing, hearing, and feeling Ian be raped and Grace being beaten in real time. There is no distance between the audience and the violence because it is directly in front of them with no barriers like film and television. Cruelty is forced upon the audience with the knowledge that the representation of violent acts on stage can have the same effect as directly witnessing a real act of violence in the outside world. The term cruelty for Artaud could "be anything from a loud sound to a scene that eliminates the comfortable space between audience and performer" (Blankenship, 6), but for Kane cruelty is one human being exacting brutality of any kind on another. There is verbal abuse, rape, torture, murder, suicide, and even a bomb, but there is no cruelty shown on her stage that does not involve some kind of harm to the characters.

## CHAPTER IV

### BUTLER AND KANE

The harm done to characters in both plays is not an arbitrary portrayal of cruelty in society. Kane remade Artaud so that she was able to shock society into contemplating the violence that comes from current gender roles and the fact that these roles can be reshaped. The theory of Judith Butler regarding gender helps to interpret the way that Kane portrayed gender, as culturally constructed, and the fact that gender roles are not constant. Neither Kane nor Butler can be described as feminists because for them the categories of male and female are a part of the patriarchal system of language that forces gender on society to perpetuate the heterosexual matrix. Butler takes issue with the unitary notion of female identity because “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (3). What it means to be one’s gender always varies with external factors, such as geographical location and time period. The fact that in different time periods or even in different physical locations in the same time period, the definition of what it is to be a male or female alters, which points to the fact that gender cannot be forced into one all encompassing meaning if there are always variations in the world. According to Butler,

“gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (6). Sex may or may not be biological, for Butler, but gender is in no way directly connected to sex and therefore does not need to be limited to the binary of sex. It is through the patriarchal language that constitutes gender that it is perceived as natural and therefore unchangeable. Language contains the debate on gender and it is through language that rules and limits are set up to govern gender. “These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (Butler, 9). The way to break free from the language of gender is through subversion.

It is those who cannot conform to normative gender identities that subvert the naturalness of gender and the language of gender. “The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’” (Butler, 17), such as homosexuals, transsexuals, and hermaphrodites. These identities cannot fit into the language of gender because they are not part of the heterosexual matrix that created the gender binary. However, the language of the binary tries to dismiss these nonconformist gender identities as “mental failures or logical impossibilities” and it is their “persistence and proliferation, however, [that] provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder” (Butler, 17). It is through dissenting gender identities that the whole system set in place by the heterosexual matrix can be seen as a construct and not an original as it purports. The so called “unity” of gender is only a practice to force gender to be uniform, though non-heterosexuals prove that it is

not. The façade of the naturalness of gender is only culture imposing meaning, through language, onto nature to protect the system of signification set up by the dominant. “The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Butler, 31). Power is given to the sexual Other, in Butler, because it is only through subversion of the cultural system of gender that there can be any room for change.

Subversion is possible for nonconformists because gender is a repeated act. According to Butler, gender “is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 33). Gender is culturally constructed and has to be maintained by continually repeating acts and gestures that reaffirm the gender that culture has given a sex. There is no internalization of gender because there is no natural core inside the body that demands a person to be male or female. One can only perform one's gender through repeated acts that have been created by the heterosexual matrix. “Such acts, gestures, enactments, ... are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 136). The failure to repeat represents the means to break out of the binary of gender, which is seen most acutely through non-heterosexuals. It is through subverted performance that “normal” gender is shown as a copy and one that can never live up to the “original”. Drag, for Butler, fully subverts gender norms because it is a performance. A person of one gender purposefully takes on the repeated acts of the opposite gender,

thereby, showing that it is action that constitutes what gender a person is and not the sex. “*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*” (Butler, 137). If sex does not limit gender, then there is no need for the binary. There can be infinite amounts of difference in gender, leading to the deconstruction of the current language on gender.

Change can only begin by subverting the repetitive gestures of normative gender. It is only dissent within the system of signification that brings about a new way of constructing gender not based on the current binary. “Just as bodily surfaces are enacted *as the natural*, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself” (Butler, 146). Once the concept of performance is accepted, then the allowance of difference and the deconstruction of the heterosexual matrix would begin. “The loss of gender norms would have the effect of proliferating gender configurations, destabilizing substantive identity, and depriving the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Butler, 146). The task that Butler sets forth is to find tactics of dissent that would work within the repetitive nature of gender to create new ways of repetition that allow for dissonance in the construction of gender by not limiting gender to male and female.

Dissonance is easy to find in *Blasted* and *Cleansed* because Kane refused to have these plays performed within accepted cultural conventions of drama and gender. Her first play, *Blasted*, not only tore apart structure but it also tore apart gender roles and the way that gender is portrayed. The beginning of this play seems to adhere to the normal standards of structure, gender, and gender roles with Ian as the dominant male and Cate

as the submissive female. This relationship functions on the basis of patriarchal authority, but Kane showed that Cate had the ability, to some degree, to refuse this power over her and even mock it.

Ian (*Looks down at his clothes.  
Then gets up, takes them all off and stands in front of  
her, naked.*)

Put your mouth on me.

Cate (*Stares. Then bursts out laughing.*)

Kane, *Blasted* 7-8

The masculine body is supposed to represent Ian's power as the dominant gender, but Cate's laughter shows that she cannot sense any power within his actual body. This points to Butler's theory that gender is imposed on the body instead of the body constituting gender. Although Cate has small rebellions against her gender role in the beginning of the play, there is no real way for her to free herself from that role because Kane has placed her in the heterosexual matrix and normative gender roles still apply. Ian eventually asserts his sexual power over Cate in the off-stage rape. Solga suggests that "Kane's choice to leave Cate's rape unstaged is both deliberate and politically marked and can be understood as a critique of representation that challenges specifically the gendered and spatial dynamics of modern realism" (349). Realism dictates that the rape is kept from the stage as a way to degrade and dismiss the woman as victim because the man has the right to take what he wants according to the patriarchy. As Solga claims, Kane is not working within the parameters of realism and therefore her use of the conventional offstage rape has more meaning. She does not dismiss the victimization of Cate as realism would have her do, but she gives it meaning through Cate's later ability to voice her own outrage at being forced to become a victim to the patriarchy.

The next morning the binary is still intact, but Cate has been stripped of her submissiveness. She is able to voice her outrage and turn the gun, which is a symbol of male power in the play, back on Ian. “*A beat, then [Cate] goes for [Ian], slapping him around the head hard and fast. He wrestles her onto the bed, her still kicking, punching and biting. She takes the gun from his holster and points it at his groin. He backs off rapidly*” (Kane *Blasted*, 26). Power is taken away from Ian as Cate refuses to repeat her role as helpless female. It is here that Kane begins to change the way that she displays gender construction in the play. Cate will no longer participate in the heterosexual matrix and will take revenge on Ian for using gender as a means to take what he wants from her. Cate uses her sexuality to strike back at Ian. “*She bites his penis as hard as she can. Ian’s cry of pleasure turns into a scream of pain. He tries to pull away but Cate holds on with her teeth*” (Kane *Blasted*, 31). It is not enough for Kane to give Cate the ability to fail to repeat her gender role, but she must blast everything apart.

The first blast is not the actual bomb hitting the hotel, but the soldier entering the room. The male/female binary has been abandoned with Cate escaping through the bathroom window and the soldier taking control from Ian. Allowing difference in gender roles begins with the soldier because he does not repeat the necessary action for the masculine role. He has power over Ian, but it is not the power given to men through the heterosexual matrix. Kane has taken power and redistributed it into violent physical power. Horrific crimes are shared with Ian so that he might see that the soldier is no longer acting within the binary, but has become a product of his environment and what culture imposed on him. It did not matter to the soldier if the person he raped was male or female, adult or child. What mattered was performing the rape, torture, and murder in

order to appease the cultural standard that a soldier must become a monster during war. The soldier is unable to take on the social construction of the masculine because he is forced to take on the construction of the soldier which for him sexually is neither male nor female. His need to rape points to masculine violence but the fact that he does not differentiate between the men and the women that he rapes points to a deviation from his normal gender role. Kane is able to bring a radical element into the binary, through homosexual rape, thereby breaking down the construction of gender.

The previous images of subversion that Kane had given the audience were through words, but with the rape of Ian by the soldier, Kane is able to subvert the binary through the performance of a homosexual rape on stage. This rape plainly gives the audience the evidence that gender is constructed because Kane has constructed it differently before their eyes. The soldier performs acts on Ian that cannot fit into the heterosexual matrix; thereby bring forth the falsity of a natural gender role. Kane is able to show through the soldier “*crying his heart out*” (Kane, *Blasted* 49) while he rapes Ian, and his eventual suicide, that the failure to repeat gender norms is difficult because of the cultural rules that have been set in place, but that it is possible through performance of parody to create a discourse that goes outside of the binary.

Although the soldier did not survive his own subversion of the matrix, there are other survivors. Cate returns to find Ian broken. He has lost control of his own perception of gender along with his understanding of his place in the world, but Cate will not let him give up. “Cate: My brother’s got blind friends. You can’t give up. / Ian: Why not? / Cate: It’s weak” (Kane *Blasted*, 55). Cate is now freed from the confines of the patriarchal binary and has taken on the identity of a survivor. She will not let Ian give up



because they have endured the breaking down of gender norms and must find new ways to define themselves. The end of the play is full of fragmented images of Ian's despair, but Cate returns to him with food. Cate has the ability to find new repeated acts to replace the ones forced upon her by normative gender roles. She has found a way to survive, by finding food, and is willing to help Ian with the transition. Kane does not give the audience an answer as to what to replace the heterosexual matrix with, but does give them a way to create a discourse outside of it. The rain at the very end of the play points to the new beginning that is possible when difference is allowed into the discourse of gender.

*Cleansed* also breaks from gender norms, but it is different from *Blasted* because culture makes an appearance to reassert gender norms through the character of Tinker. The other characters in *Cleansed* challenge the meaning of the binary even more than *Blasted* by incorporating homosexual love, cross dressing, and incest. The setting for this play is what Kane calls a University, which stands for a patriarchal institution, but it is really a correctional facility for the Other. Those within the confine are outside of social norms and Tinker must bring these deviants back within the fold of normality no matter how painful. The University image is used by Kane for its connection to higher learning and a part of maturation that youths must go through. What must be learned in a University is sanctioned by society, which means the patriarchal authority has complete control. What must be learned to flourish in the outside world is taught within the walls of the University. Kane's University is no different. Those within the walls are taught to conform to gender norms so that they will be able to be functioning members of society.

The deviants from sexual norms that must be taught to conform begin with Carl and Rod. They show their intimacy and their honesty through an exchange of rings. Carl swears his undying love to Rod, while Rod can only give him the truth. "I love you *now*. I'm with you *now*. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you" (Kane, *Cleansed* 111). The strain that is placed on homosexual love by the heterosexual matrix is shown clearly by Rod's inability to swear that his feelings, no matter how genuine they are, will be able to last while gender norms force them to perform as heterosexual males. This private moment between the lovers cannot be private at all because Tinker is watching them. Society keeps under surveillance those that refuse to conform and love that diverges from heterosexual norms is watched with suspicion, loathing, and an immediate need for retribution for the crimes committed against the heterosexual matrix. The punishment for purposely stepping outside of the boundaries of gender for Carl is a severe beating, but this beating is meant as instruction. Tinker says, "[d]on't kill him. Save him" (Kane *Cleansed*, 116). The heterosexual matrix that created the binary wants Carl back and Tinker is only trying to save him from himself by using any means necessary. The perceived naturalness of the dichotomy between male and female must be protected and Carl's unnaturalness is a break in the system that must be repaired. It is not only Carl that must be saved, but Tinker wants Rod as well. On pain of death, Carl gives up his lover and in turn comes closer to being reinserted into the heterosexual matrix.

Tinker wants to keep Carl from being able to stray from the boundaries by reaffirming his love for Rod, so he cuts out Carl's tongue. Carl's performance now moves from language to action. Each new way that Carl thinks of to express his love for Rod and his regret are a conscious failure to repeat the actions of his specific gender role

and each of these ways are systematically taken away from him. When Carl tries to write a love message to Rod in the mud, Tinker cuts off his hands and when he tries to do a dance of love for Rod, Tinker cuts off his feet. Each cut made by Tinker is an effort to strip away the parts of Carl that resists the matrix and in so doing Tinker is trying to bring him closer to conformity. He is trying to save him. In the end, Tinker cannot save either of them. When Tinker asks “you or him, Rod, what’s it to be”, Rod simply replies “me. Not Carl. Me” (Kane, *Cleansed* 142). He then cuts Rod’s throat because if he cannot force Rod into the heterosexual matrix than he must be eliminated to keep the binary safe. The final act of Rod is a performance of love between two men that reasserts the parody of heterosexual norms, bringing into focus the construction of gender by the patriarchy. Kane shows a strong love, a love worth dying for, between two males, which brings about a discourse of difference.

Kane continues her discourse of difference with the incestuous love between a brother and sister, Graham and Grace. The fact that Graham is dead and Grace is trying to bring him back complicates the play in ways that Kane leaves open for debate. There is no clear explanation for Graham as either hallucination or corporeal ghost. What matters for Grace is that he is physically there for her and her perception is all that is relevant for the play. Whether he is a hallucination or not does not change the fact that the audience sees him on the stage and the actions performed by Graham and Grace are the channel that Kane uses to continue the parody of gender performatives. It is not only the fact that Grace and Graham are in love that Kane uses to parody, but she brings in queering as well by Grace wanting to become Graham. She demands Graham’s clothes from Tinker and when Tinker concedes she puts them on and the seemingly innocent

bystander, Robin, is forced to wear her clothes. Grace is able to take what she feels inside and wear it outside, further severing her from the binary. Graham then helps her to act and sound like him, “*Gradually, she takes on the masculinity of his movements, his facial expressions...When she speaks, her voice is more like his*” (Kane, *Cleansed* 119). Grace learns to repeat different acts and gestures to reflect what she wants on the inside despite the physical appearance of her body. Grace is allowed by Kane to perform outside of the normative gender laws because drag is the most effective method of revealing that the sexed body and gender are not one and the same. Grace is able to learn a new set of masculine actions that have nothing to do with the sex she was born with. Culture has constructed gender and Kane gives Grace the ability to reconstruct it in the way that she chooses, by becoming her brother.

The final act of redemption that Tinker gives to Carl and Grace takes away their ability to recreate gender norms to their own standards. Tinker performs a sex change operation on both as a means of reinserting both back into the heterosexual matrix and to give their desire the appropriate outlet. Grace is now free to act as a man because her sex matches her desire to be the male gender and Carl is free to feel love for a man because his own physical manhood has been taken away. The subversive efforts of Carl and Grace have been stripped from them by a society that cannot accept difference into the cultural construction of gender and because Grace is safely back in the binary, Graham leaves her. Graham says, “It’s over” (Kane *Cleansed*, 41) and then leaves with Tinker. He is no longer needed to protect Grace in the University, but she still loves him and is angry at him for leaving her. “Hear a voice or catch a smile turning from the mirror. You bastard how dare you leave me like this” (Kane *Cleansed*, 46). Tinker may have

been able to force her body to coincide with her gender, but he has not taken from her the sexual love for her brother, which makes it both incestuous and homosexual. What Tinker has taken from her is her brother. Graham is no longer physically there for Grace and that has left her suddenly empty inside. She says, “when I don’t feel it, it’s pointless. Think about getting up it’s pointless. Thinking about eating it’s pointless...Think about dying only it’s totally fucking pointless” (Kane *Cleansed*, 46). Performing for her is now futile, whether it be performing outside of gender norms or conforming to them, because her will has been taken away from her. Kane leaves the audience with this image. “*The sun gets brighter and brighter, the squeaking of the rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening*” (Kane, *Cleansed* 47). The play ends with the reassertion of the heterosexual matrix, but it also leaves the audience with the sense that this reassertion leaves them blinded and deaf.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kane's plays are without doubt violent and unpredictable, but these qualities are what make her message all the more effective. Although some may associated her violence with frivolity or naiveté, the acts of cruelty shown on her stage have a larger purpose that she would not state explicitly. She relied on the theatricality and physicality of the theater to bring the audience closer to the action so that they would have an emotional experience, which would lead them to acknowledge the effects of cultural construction of gender on society. Kane's use of the manifesto of Artaud is clearly seen through her emphasis of image over words on the stage, but she does not embrace Artaud's complete alienation of the audience. Witnessing the physical representations of brutality on stage by the audience would lead not to complete alienation, for Kane, but to an opening that would allow the exploration of difference in gender roles. Butler's theory on the subversion of gender as a means to reveal the fiction of gender as a naturalized binary helps to explore the way that Kane uses gender in her plays. Performance is essential to Kane, Artaud, and Butler although in different ways for each. Artaud focused on the *mise en scene* to drive performance, while Butler saw the performative nature of gender as a repeated act institutionalized by patriarchal society.

Kane is able to take both of these notions of performance and put them into her plays to create a space on the stage that gave the audience the truth. Not just the truth about the gender binary, but about the way the Other is punished and the fact that violence is happening in our society although no one wants to acknowledge the consequences of it. Kane's plays give the audience a view of the world that is disturbing and painful to watch, but they are about change and the possibility of change. Dramatic conventions change and Kane was willing to try new forms of drama that had no connection to realism. She was able to open up discussion of difference not only in gender, but in dramatic forms. Her plays may end with the reassertion of the heterosexual matrix as in *Cleansed* or with the prospect of change as in *Blasted*, but in both plays Kane gives us something to talk about. She has given us drama that draws blood from the characters and the audience, in the hope that it will ignite thought and discussion, which might lead to the allowance of difference.

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