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Apology of Fear: Calixto Bieito's King Lear

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

On the three occasions that Calixto Bieito staged Shakespeare's character Lear he brought out the perplexity of fear which is expressed by a backlash against the loss of our own authority and, therefore, against the destruction of our own identity. And in line with a post-dramatic discourse that codifies performative simulation starting from the real thing, in his stage proposals the director reflects a post-modern conception of Lear's regime and identity crisis. This paper offers a cross-sectional analysis of *El rei Lear* (Teatre Romea, 2004), *Forests* (Barcelona Internacional Teatre, 2012) and *Lear* (Opéra National de Paris, 2016) based on a series of considerations in the world of thought which find a solution for the survival of the individual and the legitimation of violence against the other in abjection.

Keywords: Calixto Bieito, fear, otherness, postmodernism, violence, William Shakespeare

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> *Our lives are awkward and fragile and we have only one thing to keep us sane: pity, and the man without pity is mad.*
>
> *Lear*, Edward Bond (1978: 98)

The final maxim spoken by the blinded king in Bond's play glosses over the ultimate meaning of the Shakespearean tragedy on which it is based: the manipulation of the pain of others — pity — as a reason and argument when one is faced with the consequences of loss, of a risk to the development of our own existence as a result of continuously fulfilling our desires. In short, the tragedy of William Shakespeare's King Lear highlights the effects of fear through diverse forms of violence that a person is capable of committing to avoid danger; in other words, a real or imaginary evil that may befall us and that undermines our own longings.

The opening scene of the tragedy is, in this respect, paradigmatic: when Lear forces his daughters to profess their devotion to him as a monarch rather than as a father, he publicly binds them to his political authority. The paradox lies in Lear abdicating through a social act that celebrates the continuity of power by applying pressure, obliging his daughters Goneril and Regan to resort to the eloquent art of saying what they do not think: a reaction against their father's will that, given his political status, becomes a predictable and, precisely for this reason, easily manipulated authority — as Améry argues (1968, translation 2011: 82). Cordelia, in contrast, adapts to the code established by the king and confines herself to carrying out her duties: given her status as a subject, she cannot speak "to draw a third more opulent" of the kingdom than her sisters because loyal obedience drives her to accept a marriage and to divide her attentions between her father and her

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husband; however, Lear interprets this silence as a father and therefore finds it impossible to accept his daughter's sincerity and repudiates her.

The paroxysm of domination that can be exercised upon someone else is the inhibition of the linguistic capacities of the submissive individual; however, according to Butler, victims use silence as a performative effect to refute the totalising will of the repressive discourse that sought to silence them (1997a, translation 2009: 225). And, according to Arendt, it is in this space of resistance where violence appears as an instrument to channel the hierarchical reaction of an authority faced with the loss of power conferred on him by the other (1970, translation 2005: 72).

Cordelia's silence has undermined the king's order and publicly abolished its symbolism. So Lear is perplexed: first, he has publicly rejected political authority in favour of Goneril and Regan, and now, before the court, he has also lost power because of the subversion of his youngest daughter. Fear then emerges, the doubt over the immediate future. Lear has renounced the two masks that linked him to the world; he no longer has a social or paternal dimension — the repudiated daughter was the only one he loved. This is how the crisis of Degree begins, in which, in the words of Girard, all forms of authority that determine the others' will self-destruct (1990, translation 2016: 247).

Today, a theatrical representation of this loss of authority leading to an identity crisis and violence inevitably implies a series of generic manifestations of postmodernism that, thanks to a number of intra-artistic resources, show the artificiality of language; in other words, the power given to a discourse that is legitimised only as an articulator of itself because reality exists insofar as it is articulated by a pastiche, defined by Jameson as an element that recalls the conventionality of the oral manifestation (1991, translation 2016: 38).

This is why this paper will relate these lines of contemporary thought to three productions in which Calixto Bieito has dealt with the figure of Lear: *El rei Lear*, by William Shakespeare (Teatre Romea, 2004); *Forests*, by Calixto Bieito and Marc Rosich (Barcelona Internacional Teatre, 2012); and *Lear*, by Aribert Reimann (Opéra National de Paris, 2016). By analysing the communicating vessels of the three productions we will be able to see the dispossession that characterises the king's madness in accordance with the post-dramatic starkness of the concept of character.

From this perspective, we must understand that in *El rei Lear* (2004),[2] Bieito used metatheatrical resources that, in a self-ironic assumption of kitsch, were intended to highlight the arbitrariness of a metareferential construct: monarchy. To cite some examples: the ketchup to simulate wounds, the microphones, the sound technician on stage or the open set design landscape in which the characters appeared but not always according to the original play.

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2. An adaptation by Xavier Zuber (based on Joan Sellent's translation) co-produced by Teatre Romea, Fòrum Barcelona 2004-GREC, Teatro Cuyás de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Palacio de Festivales de Cantabria. The recording of this show can be viewed thanks to the Centro de Documentación Teatral at the Instituto Nacional de las Artes Escénicas y de la Música. The production details can be consulted at: http://www.focus.cat/ca/tea/archiveitem/15.

Thus, the genre in which the public humiliation with which Lear sacrifices himself must also be shattered in search of its limits, if we accept a posthumous convention of artistic languages in which the translation of the crisis of the authoritarian discourse involves a virtual transgression that continues the spectacular fiction of the reality that has taken place, according to Žižek (2002, translation 2008: 15).

The production advocated ugliness as a symbol of expiration, of what by definition is incapable of happening. This, at first, was reflected in the costumes and the darkness of the scenic space and gradually became evident in the grubbiness of the elements used by the actors for their characterisations, as Gómez Sánchez has pointed out (2016: 364); an accumulation that reached its peak with the madness of Lear, who, as Delgado noted (2005: 17), sees himself as destitute in a kingdom, destroyed and decomposed,

Such aesthetics understand that theatre, according to Fischer-Lichte, is a system of signs that takes as references iconic elements of the culture in which it occurs, and it is upon this premise that he stages violence using elements from the contemporary world — with cinematographic overtones, as it were — to condemn its spectacularization (1983, translation 1999: 275).

We move, in line with the cosmological emptiness suggested by Bloom (1998, translation 2002: 601), within a mental terrain in which a character is just a presence, a corporeal element that only reacts to the fear of abuse, as Delgado points out (2010: 283), because he has lost the exterior images that supported his existence in society, which can only be grasped through the correlation of pain, using pity for solace. This relief occurs when Lear definitively renounces everything that characterised him by meeting the Poor Tom that Edgar, Gloucester's son, has become: "Thou art the thing itself: / unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, / forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! / come unbutton here" (Act 3, Scene 4).

Both characters have been forced to abjection and reduced to their corporeality; they are both condemned to scatological awareness to survive the lack of a name or a title that identifies them in society; that is, *verba*. It is then when we can understand the grotesque dimension of the piece, because, according to Kott, "the process of degradation is always the same. Everything that distinguishes a man, his titles, social position, even his name, is lost. Names are no longer needed. Everyone is just a shadow of himself; just a man" (1965, translation 2007: 210-211). And, given their status as physical beings, the aforementioned characters cannot permit others to renounce the body, the only common element when recognising in the other the social perception of yourself, as Améry argues (1968, translation 2011: 64). This is why Edgar and Lear prevent the Count of Gloucester from committing suicide.

Gloucester is deceived by his son, who takes advantage of his father's blindness to make him believe that he is on the cliffs of Dover, and, when the Count arrives, he deceives him again by telling him that he has survived the leap (and I stress that Gloucester, although he has not jumped, does have the perception of having fallen down the cliffs; we find here the suprarational dimension of so-called absurdity). It is in these circumstances that

Edgar (Lluís Villanueva), Gloucester (Carles Canut) and Lear (Josep M. Pou). ©David Ruano

the Count meets Lear and lends sufficient power to the king's stoic words to disregard death if it is not by natural causes: a meeting in which Bieito decides that Lear, already a vagabond, feeds a helpless Gloucester with porridge in one of the most successful scenes of the production.

The situation is, as I have indicated, the theatrical confrontation of pity. It is a metaphor of the compassion between two characters that need to mirror each other to understand the meaning of the abjection that has befallen them because of the decisions concerning their families. Shakespeare formulated it as follows:

> Lear: Get thee glass eyes;
> And like a scurvy politician, seem
> To see the things thou dost not. [...]
> If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
> I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:
> Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:
> Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air,
> We wawl and cry. [...]
> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools: this a good block.
>
> (Act 4, Scene 6)

We can recognise in the image of complicity, which emerges in the climax of Lear's crisis of identity, a hallucination regarding the deformity of the characters, who find themselves a reflection of each other: faced with the rhetorical deception of his daughters, Lear is as blind as Gloucester, who is tangled up by the arguments of the bastard son as if he were an insane king. This form of radical otherness, while making the *doble monstre* of which Girard speaks visible (1972, translation 1983: 171) and that characterises the public and private dimensions of men, emerges out of the fear of madness:

> Fool: If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten
> for being old before thy time.
> King Lear: How's that?
> Fool: Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst
> been wise.
> King Lear: O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven
> Keep me in temper: I would not be mad!
>
> (Act 1, Scene 5)

Madness, understood by Kott (1965, translation 2007: 226) as the awareness of the ideological mask that we project on the world, appears through the desire to hold to oneself; in other words, when the object of loss is one's own identity, at risk of substitution based on the symbolic scission between being and speech, as Kristeva notes (1980: 58). A preliminary question that can only be challenged from the abjection of the subject himself, who, according to Butler (1997b, translation 2016: 78), re-directs the violence towards himself in a fictionalisation of the environment that involves the psyche.

This formulation is essential to an understanding of a production such as *Forests* (2012),[3] adapted by Marc Rosich and Bieito himself, which suggests the importance of the Shakespearian forests as facilitators of the violent expression with which perplexity over loss leads a person to fill a gnostic emptiness.

The production was a symphonic poem that covered the learning and awareness-raising process of possession in an environment ruled by the will of the human being to satisfy his impulses. However, if we live in a world full of mourning for what has been lost and pain for the awareness of emptiness, our only possible resolution is to assert our own divinity to impose ourselves upon others and establish relations of subordination that use violence to express fear, distress, envy and betrayal aimed at the substitution of this free will that is incapable of legitimising itself, and is, therefore, fearful.

In *Forests* we found a post-dramatic scene that avoided the narrativity of certain situations in favour of the cultural dilemma with which, according to Lehmann, performers are the victims of the discourse they articulate (1999, translation 2013: 264). Words no longer belong to the speakers but linked with the performers' extraneous body, are disseminated in a textual landscape through the multiplicity of voices with which the loss of one's own identity is yielded in a context of commodification that dismisses the faculty of thinking because it conceives difference without binary oppositions.

The actor's autonomy and his or her emotional risk to the detriment of the traditional notion of character gives the production an inter-artistic dimension in which creation, the fact of structuring a composition, is shared by all those who participate in it, as González Martín recalls (2015: 442). In this way, given that the performer's involvement is not delimited, argues

3. A production of Barcelona Internacional Teatre and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre for the World Shakespeare Festival 2012. The show can be viewed thanks to the Centro de Documentación Teatral of the Instituto Nacional de las Artes Escénicas y de la Música. The production details can be consulted on the following link: http://www.focus.cat/ca/tea/archiveitem/606.

Roser Camí, Josep M. Pou, Katy Stephens, Hayley Carmichael, Christopher Simpson and George Costigan. ©Graeme Braidwood

Fischer-Lichte, the audience has no power over meanings that emerge out of the physical presence of all the stage elements (2004, translation 2014: 296).

Bieito used, this time explicitly, the disfiguration with which Samuel Beckett represents the destabilisation of the image of man: shattering narcissism through dispossession leads the being to explore evil impulses that seek to prove again and again the quietness of others' horror, as Grossman points out (2004: 60). And, as McLuskie has noted, the Shakespearian corpus enables a theatre of cruelty in which everyone is exposed to pain, regardless of the narrative succession that characterises the fable and offers a broad threshold in which Rebecca Ringst's set design places the performers in a white box with a big central tree, which at first recalls the scepticism of an art gallery and throughout the production evolves into an indomitable landscape, a space inspired by Dante's *Inferno* in which the civilian codes are abolished and evil is sublimated (2013: 251 and 252).

While Améry avoids contextualising torture at a spatial level because it develops anywhere that chronological circumstance allows (1970, translation 2001: 92), Shakespeare suggests that the natural environment legitimises the imposition of our own corporeality to survive disenchantment; an imposition that shatters the capacity to help, a constitutive value of the human being, and its expectation in favour of the struggle for an individual existence that does not understand borders in terms of otherness. Here we find the conundrum: the fact that a fellow human being becomes the enemy legitimises a violent response to the doubt resulting from the encounter with otherness and the recognition of our own abjection in the vision of an object impossible to achieve, as Kristeva argues (1980: 180).

Conceiving the order of a world ruled by our own interest is a fraudulent endeavour, difficult to accept, a disillusion that invites alienation to revel endlessly in the dissatisfaction derived from the continued ideological awareness of the mechanisms that govern the supposed civilisation:

> Fool: When priests are more in word than matter;
> When brewers mar their malt with water;
> When nobles are their tailors' tutors;
> No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors;
> When every case in law is right;
> No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
> When slanders do not live in tongues;
> Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
> When usurers tell their gold i' the field;
> And bawds and whores do churches build;
> Then shall the realm of Albion
> Come to great confusion:
> Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
> That going shall be used with feet.
>
> (Act 3, Scene 2)

We need to redeem and exonerate ourselves consciously with our projection in order to re-establish the necessary order to act and be in the world in accordance with those who overcome the fear of death: when we are aware of our own abjection, of non-existence in the world other than through our fellow human beings, we can free ourselves from earthly needs, which are just dependent burdens that determine relations with the other, as Améry asserts (1968, translation 2011: 76-77). Shakespeare expresses this through Edgar's words:

> Yet better thus, and known to be contemned,
> Than still contemned and flattered. To be worst,
> The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
> Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
>
> (Act 4, Scene 1)

In fact, the librettist Claus H. Henneberg argues that the constant evidence of thought and the simultaneous exteriorisation of feelings by all the characters is the touchstone upon which the musical and dramaturgic composition of the opera from 1978 by Aribert Reimann entitled *Lear*, which Bieito premiered in May 2016, is structured (2016: 71). 4 The mise-en-scène was based on the collapse of the social order embodied by Lear and how the bonds between human beings, when they break, give way to the extraneous suffering, with which we avoid our own decrepitude, according to the adapter of the production, Bettina Auer (2016: 93).

Améry points out that human beings, although aspiring to exist for others, take refuge in youth out of a jealous unachievable longing, the consequence of the horror of expiration (1968, translation 2011: 85). Hence Cordelia becomes the refuge and the mirror of the new Lear proposed by Bieito, who recognises himself in her once she is murdered. This discovery leads Lear to understand the scope of the initial decision with which he repudiated

4. A new production commissioned to the director by the Opéra National de Paris. The details can be consulted at: https://www.operadeparis.fr/en/season-15-16/opera/lear.

Edgar (Andrew Watts) and the extra Max Delor. ©Elisa Haberer/OnP

his youngest daughter and perpetuated the ageing of authority. To stress this, the director places on stage an old man, serving as an extra, who, completely naked, crosses a stage falling apart while Lear flees to Dover during the storm.

Thus, the king flees a state — corrupt in the hands of his daughters as it was when he ruled it — that reprimands those who do not submit to it. And, thanks to the advice of a professional fool, he will understand that one's fellow human beings are the existential meaning of those who have nothing. In Shakespeare's words:

> The body's delicate: the tempest in my mind
> Doth from my senses take all feeling else
> Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude! [...]
> Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just.
>
> (Act 3, Scene 4)

It is an absolute dispossession that reaches its peak with the disappearance of the fool, a disappearance that Shakespeare does not verbalise and that might match Améry's idea (1968, translation 2011: 92):

> He assumes the annulment, aware that by assuming it he can only conserve himself by rebelling against himself but also aware that, and here acceptance appears as the affirmation of something irrefutable, his revolt is bound to failure. He says "no" to the annulment while asserting it, because only in the rejection without perspectives is it possible to face the inevitable as himself.

In 2004 Bieito resolved this situation by having the king kill the character played by Boris Ruiz during scene six of act three. Beneath the rain and during the crazy trial that Lear imagines for his daughters, a bare and bewigged Edgar becomes a judge while an invisible bug is the incarnation of Goneril. When the fool squashes it, a Lear in underwear points at him and gives him the role of the second daughter, Regan, and, before he can flee, the king strangles the fool, which the director makes coincide with the end of the storm and the last image of the first part of the play.

In Reimann's opera, in contrast, the fool's flight is explicit: at the end of the first act, when all the characters leave, he looks questioningly at both sides and decides to leave in the opposite direction to the others because, when we still have our wits, we realise that we must take things as they come and he is aware that his task is no longer necessary. Lear has already achieved clairvoyance and, once he has lost the value of existence, he has overcome the fear of death and can take on the role of his own fool. Only when the monarch's madness is real and exteriorised is it possible to justify the fact of taking on the role and, therefore, the disappearance of the figure in which he had embodied himself thus far.

On this occasion, Bieito chooses to represent the fool, performed by the actor Ernst Alisch, as a character outside the drama, a mental image that only Lear can sense and that remains on the sides of the stage action in an alienated attitude and without interacting. In other words, here, during the entire first act, the fool is Lear's shadow; from the second act, when the king acknowledges the lack of ideological meaning of his actions and becomes his own shadow, the voice of consciousness is no longer necessary.

The director skilfully reflects the disconnection of the fool, surreal in a tangible world, using an imagery related to the *clochards* characteristic of Samuel Beckett's derisory aesthetic with which he links a stage tradition that represents the disappointment caused by the awareness of the mechanisms that rule human beings and their surroundings through the assumption of disillusion and, therefore, the hope of a gnostic resolution despite knowing that the only way out is to recreate in oneself because faith — understood as innocence faced with the articulating mechanisms of society — is meaningless when one is aware of abjection itself.

In conclusion, all three productions are tainted by the consideration that faith is derisory when faced with the rational convention with which a civilisation capable of manipulating a series of actions in search of a renewal of the old regime is structured. Thus, we must understand Calixto Bieito's three stage solutions in perspective and as a diachronic process when interpreting the character of Lear.

Through a series of apparent stage paradoxes that make the theatre convention evident, the director makes us participants in a pornographic shame that must be exhibited in keeping with the resources and stimuli characteristic of contemporary times. This is how the audience of today manifests the validity of a text that reflects the learning process with which to assume the consequences of their acts.

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