

Bodies under Siege: Masculinity, Sexual Violence, and Power in Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between masculinity, sexual violence, and power in Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), arguing that bodily vulnerability exposes the instability of identities founded on domination. Situating the play within In-Yer-Face theatre and its affinities with Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, it explores how explicit violence and disrupted dramatic form reveal connections between private abuse and political brutality. Through close textual analysis and engagement with critical scholarship, the paper traces Ian's construction of heterosexual masculinity through misogyny, possessiveness, and homophobia, alongside its subsequent collapse under the Soldier's violence. Ian's violation undermines the assumption that heterosexual masculinity guarantees bodily autonomy and authority. Cate's experience, meanwhile, shows that vulnerability can coexist with resistance, allowing agency to emerge amid coercion and suffering. The Soldier's repetition of remembered atrocities illustrates how traumatic loss can perpetuate violence without absolving perpetrators of responsibility. The transformation of the hotel room into a war zone connects intimate coercion with military brutality through shared patterns of possession and bodily control. Finally, the paper considers how Kane's representations of mutilation, hunger, and bodily exposure confront spectators with the ethical demands of witnessing suffering. It argues that the play's theatrical extremity critiques gendered and political domination, positioning the body as a site where power is exercised, experienced, and destabilised.

Keywords: Sarah Kane, *Blasted*, In-Yer-Face theatre, hegemonic masculinity, sexual violence, bodily vulnerability, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Kane's theatrical productions are some of the most prominent examples of confrontational British drama in the 1990s. Kane emerged in the mid-1990s, when Britain saw a resurgence of theatrical experimentation as young artists began to test traditional boundaries of what could be represented, spoken, and physically performed on stage. She was one of the most visible writers connected to this aggressive dramatic aesthetic, as her plays centre on violence, sexuality, exposure and suffering that are typically marginalised from mainstream theatrical depictions. Sexuality and violence, bodily vulnerability, and unstable identities constantly engage with broader configurations of power in her theatre. Kane does not consider sexuality as just a feature of an individual's personal identity, but rather as the recognition, regulation or rejection of sexual bodies, desires, and relationships. *Blasted* sees heterosexual masculinity as related to aggression, misogyny and unequal sexual power, and the shift from the hotel room to the war zone underscores the fragility of an identity based on domination.

Ayyildiz identifies *Blasted* as a significant example of In-Yer-Face theatre because it confronts spectators with what is "unsaid and concealed" (185). Kane's extremity, then, is not merely in shock, but in making socially uncomfortable experiences theatrically public. This is immediately apparent in *Blasted* as the destruction of the hotel room of Ian & Cate is a direct link between the sexual and psychological violence of the private space and the brutality of the war (Kane 39). Ayyildiz thus notes the play's combination of domestic and military violence and its confrontation with rape, degradation, hunger and destruction (187–90). The intimacy to warfare is a portrayal of how Kane has rejected the traditional dividing line between private afflictions and public disaster.

Kane's In-Yer-Face sensibility is also formal. Biçer states that she adopts postdramatic means that break up linear time, coherent plot, stable characterisation and united dramatic space (76). Kane herself stated that "the form is the meaning of the play" (qtd. in Biçer 77). The break with hotel room realism to war in *Blasted* thus has significance in both content and form. Ayyildiz and Biçer thus highlight two interrelated facets of Kane's In-Yer-Face practice: confrontation through explicit subject matter, and disruption through dramatic form (189-90; 76-79). Kane is not only bringing taboo material onto the stage but also changing the structures that present violence, sexuality and vulnerability in the theatre. The relationship between Kane and Antonin Artaud is more an affinity in theatrical practice than a simple reproduction of the Theatre of Cruelty. The question is what Kane does with Artaud's concepts of the body's presence, the disturbance of the senses, and theatrical imagery in her own dramas. There is a significant amount of overlap between the two, as Dluback points out, in that Artaud was a crucial influence on Kane, and that the latter's use of physical action and staged cruelty interrupts the audience's habitual distance from

violence (7–10). The physical body is central to this relationship. Dluback observes that it is “physical bodies moving, speaking, and feeling that makes the theatre so powerful” (8). Kane repeatedly uses this immediacy by placing bodies under pressure: penetration, beating, mutilation, starvation and transformation. The body consequently becomes a theatrical language through which vulnerability and power can be communicated without relying entirely upon explanatory dialogue. *Blasted* not only tears apart the dramatic space of the hotel room that housed Ian and Cate; Ian’s later physical violation by the Soldier also makes the collapse of his authority evident (Kane 39, 49–50).

Dluback’s discussion is particularly relevant because she records Kane’s statement that “the language of the theatre is image” (qtd. in Dluback 10). This does not imply an abandonment of speech; rather, dialogue operates alongside gesture, bodily action, spatial transformation and visual extremity. Theatrical pictures can then impart psychological and political messages that go beyond text. The “Artaudian” aspect of Kane’s theatre is therefore not in the quantity of violence that she represents but in the theatricalisation of the body, image and sensation. Dluback argues that Kane seeks to make the spectator a witness – not a shielded spectator – of brutality (10). However, Kane uses this sensory confrontation to pose historically specific questions of war, gender, sexuality, homophobia and institutional domination. In this way, her theatre can be described as Artaudian in its corporeal and visual intensity but is also clearly focused on the structures of late 20th-century life, both political and intimate.

Kane’s theatre emerges from the social and theatrical context of 1990s Britain, but rarely in the form of a political statement. The political is more frequently manifested in the bodies, in the intimate relationships, in the apparently private domination. Erden argues that Kane’s violence in *Blasted* and *Cleansed* (1998) questions constructed gender roles and the normativity of a male-dominated social order (401–03). Political power is thus not only mediated via public institutions but also via relations of gender, sexuality and bodily control in the everyday. Erden also reports that this was a successful era for British theatre in the 90s, as well as women playwrights still working in a theatre that has traditionally been dominated by men (402). Kane’s refusal to define herself through a simple political label does not remove gender from her theatre. Instead, her plays repeatedly reveal how apparently private relationships are structured through unequal distributions of authority. In *Blasted*, Ian’s treatment of Cate provides an immediate example. His assertion, “Cate. You’re stupid. You’re never going to get a job” (Kane 8), reinforces an unequal relationship in which his sexual and economic authority is accompanied by verbal aggression. Erden interprets Ian’s actions as part of a pattern of male supremacy (403–04). This rejection of queer identification, delivered with a sense of authority, further links masculine authority with identities which appeared to be in opposition to heterosexual dominance. The Soldier’s later violence exposes the instability of the power Ian had assumed to be secure.

BLASTED: HOMOPHOBIA, MASCULINITY, SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND WAR

Ian and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity

In *Blasted*, Kane builds Ian’s manhood by asserting his power over gender, sexuality, space, and bodies. At first glance, the impression is a good one: He is older than Cate, financially self-sufficient, working in a profession and sexually savvy and weaponised. But all this is combined with the symptoms of disease and fear and emotional insecurity. His masculinity is not thus given the sense of secure identity, as it is continually claimed and asserted through domination.

This structure is revealed when Ian treats the Cate. He calls her “stupid” and tells her that she is “never going to get a job” (Kane 8), establishing a hierarchy in which he claims intellectual, economic and sexual superiority. The same logic appears when he tells her, “You’re more mine than his” (Kane 16). He uses the possessive formulation to make intimacy into ownership and assumes that heterosexual relationships give him the right to own the woman.

Cen and Ma see Ian as experiencing a crisis of masculinity, where his assumed leadership is constantly challenged by sickness, alcoholism, strained relationships and insecurities. They eventually describe him as “a dying man in crisis” whose masculine power becomes increasingly difficult to sustain (9). His aggression can therefore be understood partly as an attempt to preserve an identity whose foundations are already unstable.

Defending this position of manhood is another way of enforcing homophobia. Cen and Ma link Ian’s resentment towards homosexuality with his overall uneasiness about his intimate and familial relationships (8). His insistence, “I’m not queer”, establishes a boundary between the heterosexual masculine identity he claims and the sexual category he rejects (Kane 44). Homophobia then plays a role in the development of his manhood by linking heterosexuality to power and separating himself from homosexuality, feminisation and giving in to his body.

Ian’s gun exemplifies this link between masculinity and control. It embodies the threat which lurks behind his sexual and spatial dominance in the hotel room. Yet the play progressively dismantles these signs of power. Ian’s diseased body undermines his autonomy as he attempts to assert, and with the arrival of the Soldier, his past authority is null and void. Cen and Ma observe that this encounter transforms Ian from perpetrator into victim and exposes the fragile basis of masculine dominance (9).

Kane therefore represents a precarious stance of heterosexual manhood which is supported by the power to possess, by misogyny, by homophobic differentiation, and by control of the body. Ian’s vulnerability is not just about the conversion of strength to weakness; it is an indication of the instability of a masculine identity that relies on maintaining other bodies and identities in subordinate roles.

Cate: Gendered Vulnerability, Sexual Power and Trauma

Cate is in a weaker position in the hotel room. She is a younger, economically precarious woman who is repeatedly told by Ian what she can and cannot do, what she is or isn't intelligent about, what she is or isn't sexual about, and how she will develop as his woman. Ian has the gun, the space, and acts like he has a right to her body. But Cate's fragility doesn't mean her passivity. Barba Guerrero and Manzanar Calvo identify precisely this distinction, arguing that in *Blasted*, "vulnerability does not equal helplessness" (1). Cate experiences psychological and sexual coercion, but repeatedly challenges Ian's assumptions and attempts to set boundaries in an environment that is mostly under Ian's control. The implied assault is thus not a stand-alone incident, but rather an ongoing and unequal relationship between the sexes. Barba Guerrero and Manzanar Calvo therefore describe the hotel as a space initially structured by psychological abuse, physical assault and female subjection (2–3). In the representation of trauma, Cate's bodily reactions complicate the analysis. Earlier in the play, she describes episodes in which consciousness appears interrupted: "I just go. Feels like I'm away for minutes or months sometimes, then I come back just where I was" (Kane 10). Because these episodes precede the assault, they should not simply be diagnosed retrospectively as its consequences. Nevertheless, Kane later places bodily interruption and sexual violation in close proximity. After the assault, Cate states, "I ache. / Everywhere. / I stink of you" (Kane 33). Thus, violation is represented corporeally; it is experienced through and retained in the body. Barba Guerrero and Manzanar Calvo point out that Cate's fragility slowly evolves into resistance and not the other way around (7–8). Her changing relation to Ian is particularly revealing. When the blinded and dependent Ian later attempts to direct her, she responds, "Don't tell me what to do" (Kane 52). The linguistic hierarchy set up at the start of the play is reversed by the statement. However, her survival in the war zone makes any interpretation of her as a passive victim even more complicated. Cate leaves out and brings back food, and tries to feed a baby, in the midst of chaos. Barba Guerrero and Manzanar Calvo then believe that her fragility can be the source of active resistance (8). It is not as if trauma is completely gone because now you are alive, but neither is it as if trauma completely drains Cate of her subjectivity. Kane doesn't look at resistance as a condition, but one that can be built within vulnerability.

The Soldier, Male Rape and the Collapse of Masculine Authority

In *Blasted*, the most significant flip-flop is in the Soldier's entrance. Ian, who has previously dominated Cate sexually and psychologically, is a victim of a type of violence which is more intense than his domestic violence, and takes away his body's autonomy. Crisis, in turn, is made of flesh and blood, not just body and mind, in the case of masculine crisis. Ibrahim and Kadhim identify the Soldier as a more extreme version of Ian whose presence brings the brutality of war into the hotel setting (85–86). With his accounts of atrocities he experienced as well as experiences in which he is a violent perpetrator, the difference between traumatised witness and violent perpetrator is deliberately left unclear.

This instability revolves around his deceased girlfriend. Before assaulting Ian, he recalls, "I made love with Col. Bastards killed her, now I'm here," and then tells Ian, "You smell like her" (Kane 48–49). Bereavement, erotic memory and violence are intertwined. The Soldier reproduces through Ian a pattern associated with the violence inflicted upon the woman he loved and perpetuates the cycle of domination instead of resolution through Ian.

Ibrahim and Kadhim see the Soldier's isolated account of horrors as proof of war's psychological effects (87). But no matter, trauma doesn't mean he is off the hook for his responsibilities. The Soldier is a man who has suffered severe loss and violence, but who also rapes, mutilates and kills. Trauma helps explain the repetition of violence without justifying it.

Rape is a stark illustration of the reversal in power, that has become explicit with Ian's rape. The man, who was once the dominant figure, is now placed in a position of bodily submission by the stage direction (Kane 49), and Ian's revolver is as meaningless as a toy against the military might of the Soldier. Ibrahim and Kadhim see the meeting as being an important one because Ian's power is taken from him and sexuality is linked to violence (86).

The pattern continues when the Soldier recalls, "He ate her eyes" (Kane 50), before inflicting a corresponding mutilation upon Ian. Remembered atrocity is thus reproduced upon another body, linking trauma with repetition rather than recovery.

This is a rape that must not, however, be confused with queer identity. Ian isn't queer because he's been raped. Sexual violation cannot be a basis for determining the victim's sexual orientation. The scene removes the assumption that heterosexual masculinity guarantees bodily sovereignty and permanent authority. Kane thus employs the Soldier to reveal the instability of a hegemonic masculinity that is based on domination.

From Hotel Room to War Zone: Private and Political Violence

One of the defining movements of *Blasted* is the transformation of an intimate space into a war zone. Kane initially situates the action in a "very expensive hotel room in Leeds—the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world" (Kane 3). The room is seemingly impervious to political turmoil, but it is already filled with sexual coercion, racism, possessiveness and the possibility of Ian's gun. In examining hospitality, McCorry illuminates the political nature of this context. He argues that *Blasted* presents hospitality as potentially "deeply coercive" rather than as an innocent relationship between host and guest (754). Ian has invited Cate into the room, but his role as host remains inseparable from his assumption of authority. Food, alcohol and money and accommodation are thus involved in an unequal exchange, based on a sexual expectation. This is further demonstrated with food. Ian eats

meat while Cate initially refuses it, and McCorry draws parallels between their different reactions and gendered and racialised violence in the wider world (753–59). Cate's rejection of what Ian offers is one more hurdle to the rule that a guest must take a host's offer.

The destruction of the room by explosion takes the violence already there to a new level (Kane 39). McCorry argues that the blast "reorients the frame" through which Ian's earlier sexual aggression and racism are understood by bringing them into relation with the violence of warfare (762). The political world therefore does not simply invade an innocent private sphere; it enlarges structures of domination that were already operating within it. The Soldier does this and transgresses the rule of hospitality by invading the room without being invited in and dominating it. The original inhabitant can no longer defend himself, and the right to ownership and territorial security are lost. The hotel consequently condenses several scales of power: body, intimate relationship, private enclosure and political territory.

The later imagery of hunger extends this collapse. The eyes of Ian are devoured by the Soldier and Ian, eventually, eats the dead baby to survive (Kane 50, 60). McCorry observes that the distinction between the human body and meat progressively deteriorates until "every body becomes potential meat for the other" (764). The deprivation of the body is then the final act of destruction of the person protected, as he/she was introduced at the play's start. The movement from hotel room to war zone gives *Blasted* its broader political significance. Domestic and military violence are never described as the same, but by Kane there are all the same structural continuities between them in the form of possession, bodily control and domination. The private body thus becomes a site where larger political violence is materially experienced.

Body, Spectatorship and the Ethics of Witnessing

The body in *Blasted* provides the point at which sexual violence, warfare and historical experience become theatrically visible. These are not just political issues of rape, blindness, hunger and mutilation, but bodies that are vulnerable and shown to the spectator. It is in this corporeality that Sosnowska's analysis of the production in Warsaw, in 1999, shows how this corporeality can acquire a historically specific meaning. She documents "strong affective reactions" that emerge from the production and claims that embodied performance can present historical violence in a material way as opposed to an abstract concept (50). The performer's body therefore becomes a point at which theatrical representation, political memory and spectator response intersect. This connection is particularly evident in Sosnowska's metaphor of Cate's body as "a site of war" (51). The formulation is a reminder of a key principle of *Blasted* – that a war is not only recorded in military structures or far away political events, but in raped, hungry, injured and displaced bodies. Large political categories emerge in the form of their implications for the individual's embodied experience. Sosnowska's "irreversible change" concept is also supported by the fact that embodied traumatic experience can lead to a change instead of just a preservation of the past (56). Ian's body change is a good illustration of this. The armed and sexually aggressive man who was introduced in the beginning is raped, blinded, starved and made dependent. Thus, violence is marked upon his body in a way that cannot simply be reversed through explanation or narrative.

The audience of the theatre, however, is different from the suffering depicted. Witnessing another's violation is not the same as experiencing such violation, nor is a performance of a character's trauma the same as experiencing a violation of the character's trauma. Instead, Kane creates an uncomfortable proximity in which bodily suffering becomes visible while remaining irreducibly another subject's experience. *Blasted* makes the question of embodiment an ethical and political one of spectatorship. It's easy to see how Sosnowska's focus on the theatrical body of history influences the extremity of Kane, one that can't be confined to shock. The violated bodies link private domination and warfare with political memory, forcing the spectators to witness suffering and feel aware of their own role as witnesses to the suffering.

Sarah Kane's *Blasted* exposes the fragility of masculine authority by connecting private sexual coercion with the brutality of war and revealing their shared dependence on bodily domination. Through its portrayal of vulnerability, resistance, and the repetition of violence, the play challenges gendered and political structures of power while confronting spectators with the ethical demands of witnessing suffering.

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