

## WRITTEN ON THE BODY: GENDER, VIOLENCE AND QUEER DESIRE IN SARAH KANE'S *CLEANSED*

Francesca Rayner

Universidade do Minho

**Abstract** This article examines the 1998 play *Cleansed*, written by one of the most controversial and one of the most European of contemporary British playwrights, Sarah Kane. The three narratives within the play explore the permeability of gender and sexual identities through the central metaphor of violence. This violence is not only symptomatic of the violence involved in the assumption of any gendered or sexual identity, whether heterosexual or *queer*, male or female, it appears, according to Kane to also be central to processes of liberation from these norms. The article also examines Kane's refusal to be judged either a feminist or *queer* writer in the light of the extreme mobility of bodily reconfiguration she promotes.

**Keywords** Drama, violence, bodily reconfiguration, gender, queer desire.

### Resumo

**Escrito no corpo: género, violência e desejo queer na peça *Cleansed* de Sarah Kane**

Este artigo analisa a peça *Purificados* (1998) de Sarah Kane, um dos mais controversos e mais europeus dos dramaturgos ingleses contemporâneos. As três narrativas da peça exploram a permeabilidade das identidades sexuais e de género através da metáfora central da violência. Esta violência é não só resultado da violência incorporada no assumir de qualquer identidade sexual e de género, tanto heterossexual como *queer*, masculino como feminino, como também, segundo Kane, central nos processos de libertação destas mesmas normas. O artigo examina a recusa de Kane em ser identificada como dramaturgo feminista ou *queer* na perspectiva da mobilidade extrema das reconfigurações corporais que a sua obra promove.

**Palavras-chaves** Teatro, violência, reconfiguração corporal, género, desejo *queer*.

### Résumé

**Écrit sur le corps: genre, violence et désir queer dans la pièce *Cleansed* de Sarah Kane**

Cet article analyse la pièce *Purifié* (1998) de Sarah Kane, un des plus controverses e plus européens des auteurs de théâtre anglais contemporains. Les trois récits de la pièce explorent la perméabilité des identités sexuels e de genre à travers de la métaphore centrale de la violence. Cette violence, selon Kane, marque simultanément l'assumption des identités sexuels e de genre mais aussi la liberation de ces normes.

L'article examine le refus de Kane d'être connoté comme auteur de theatre feministe ou *queer* dans la perspectif de la mobilité extreme des reconfigurations corporels qu'elle defende dans son oeuvre.

**Mots-clé** Théâtre, violence, reconfiguration corporel, genre, desir *queer*.

*I think Cleansed more than any of my other plays  
uses violence as metaphor*

Sarah Kane, interview with Nils Tabert (1998)

In a much underrated volume of critical essays *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (1997), contributors such as Judith Butler, Gayle Rubin and Teresa de Lauretis examine the relationship between this theoretical odd couple from a variety of perspectives. Two general assumptions, however, seem to be shared by many of the contributors to the volume. The first is that while there is a need for a clear theoretical separation between the two areas, it makes theoretical and political sense to combine their approaches in order to deconstruct processes of heteronormativity. As Judith Butler (Butler, 1997: 3) comments «(i)f sexual relations cannot be reduced to gender positions, which seems true enough, it does not follow that an analysis of sexual relations apart from an analysis of gender relations is possible». The second assumption is that this potential for joint work on questions of gender and sexuality is not happening enough in current critical practice. As Elizabeth Weed (Weed, 1997: x) notes in her introduction «(o)n the one hand, there are queer thematics (such as the rich elaboration of the workings of normativity or the disruption of identity) which seem to invite an obvious interplay between the two fields, on the other, there is an exclusionary logic that all but precludes such interplay».

Cultural production in the field of the performing arts might be expected to represent an exception to such a tendency and to combine analysis of questions of gender and sexuality in both performance and critical writing on performance. However, it remains quite a rare event to come across a dramatic text that explores both questions of gender and queer sexuality without subsuming them into simple extensions of each other or privileging one over the other. Queer plays have overwhelmingly been written by men about men with the women characters largely invisible and occasionally verging on the stereotypical<sup>1</sup>. Plays focusing on gender have similarly often made queer desire, whether male or female, invisible, or less relevant than questions of gender<sup>2</sup>. One of the reasons, therefore, for the focus of this paper on the English contemporary dramatist

<sup>1</sup> For example, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* series (2007) has women as angels or mothers and in *Product* (2006) by Mark Ravenhill, a male film producer outlines a project for a film to an actress who remains silent throughout and merely walks off the stage at the end. While this certainly makes a point about the cultural politics of the project, it is hardly a challenging or active role for an actress.

<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true in relation to the visibility of lesbianism. Even in a playwright as sensitive to questions of gender and sexuality as Caryl Churchill, questions of sexuality invariably concern men while questions of gender concern women. See, for example, her *Cloud Nine* (1989) translated into Portuguese as *Sétimo Céu* (2002).

Sarah Kane's 1998 play *Cleansed* is precisely its double interest in questions of gender and of queer sexuality and the ways in which both intersect<sup>3</sup>.

A second reason for exploring this particular play has to do with the connections it forges between the performative processes that construct gender and sexual conformity and acts of violence. In this play, the violence of enforced gender identification and compulsory heterosexuality is quite literally inscribed on the bodies of the characters, in acts which are often horrific and brutal. Judith Butler's highly political concept of gender performativity<sup>4</sup> has often been reduced to a vision of playful performance, where individuals swap genders as easily and as effortlessly as they swap one set of clothes for another. Indeed, in what she has referred to a «bad reading» of her work, Butler (Butler *apud* Hall 2003: 74) outlines the political and epistemological consequences of reducing processes of gender performativity to mere performance:

The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism.

It is the absence of a sense of compulsion and historicity that drives the citation of gender and sexual norms that makes Butler caution against limiting performativity to the idea of performance, even when much of the vocabulary she makes use of to describe processes of performativity resonates with theatricality. In *Cleansed* the compulsion to perform one's gender or sexual role is, however, explicit throughout, as are the severe consequences for those who fail to perform gender and sexual roles correctly. The linkage between violence and the assumption of a gendered and sexed identity in the play thus resists commodification and consumerism in its savage dismemberment and re-membering of the body. Such processes are definitively queer, for they quite literally deconstruct clear boundaries between male and female or homosexual and heterosexual through acts of bodily destruction and reconstruction.

The starting point for the writing of the play was Roland Barthes' controversial parallel between a rejected lover and an inmate of Dachau in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1979) Although initially disturbed by the parallel, Kane came to see it as a comment on heightened states of emotion within claustrophobic set-

<sup>3</sup> The first performance of the play in Portugal was at the Teatro Helena Sá e Costa on the 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2002. All Kane's plays have been translated by Pedro Marques (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Butler envisages gender performativity as a process whereby the compulsory citation of gender and sexual norms constructs the illusion of stable gender or sexual identities over time. She outlines this concept in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and develops it further in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of «Sex»* (1993) which has a chapter devoted to the question of queer criticism and politics.

tings. As she herself acknowledged, *Cleansed* is a play about extreme love and they ways in which it confronts suffering and attempts to overcome it. Unlike her first play *Blasted* (1995) which had linked the rape of a young woman in a hotel in the United Kingdom and rape as a war crime in Bosnia, *Cleansed* is a more abstract piece where the visual imagery is as fundamental, if not more so, than the words of the text. All the information the audience is given is that the action takes place in a former university which has been converted into a secretive institution presided over by the sadistic Tinker<sup>5</sup>. However, as Graham Saunders (Saunders 2002: 183) points out, such places will remind the audience of the real-life conversions of football stadiums and other formerly “neutral” spaces for the purposes of torture or execution, from Latin America to Afghanistan.

This institution appears to be a men-only preserve. When Grace comes to collect the clothes of her dead brother Graham, she is informed by Tinker that she cannot remain in the institution as she is a woman. However, he allows her to put on her brother’s clothes, which she removes from another inmate, Robin, who had been given them to wear, while Robin is then forced to wear Grace’s dress. Grace thus remains in the institution<sup>6</sup>. Yet as Grace puts on the clothes to feel closer to her dead brother, she voices a desire for a more profound transformation which would go beyond surface similarity. When Robin asks her what she would change in herself if she could change just one thing, she replies «My body. So it looked like it feels/Graham outside like Graham inside». (126)<sup>7</sup> This literal melancholic incorporation of her brother into her own body progresses throughout the play under the less than benevolent supervision of Tinker. In a highly moving and beautifully staged encounter with her dead brother, Graham teaches Grace to mirror his physical movements and way of speaking and they eventually make love as a sunflower rises up from the floor of the stage. Through such episodes, Grace comes increasingly to resemble her brother not just psychically but also externally. Yet in a shocking episode where Grace is beaten and raped by a group of unidentified «Voices», mass incomprehension of such individual psychological processes which lie beyond the “norm” is graphically illustrated through the physical and verbal violence directed against Grace.

---

<sup>5</sup> The name Tinker was a revenge tactic by Kane on the *Daily Mail* critic Jack Tinker who had labelled her first play *Blasted* «this disgusting feast of filth». However, the notion of the verb «to tinker with» in other words to intervene without necessarily improving a situation is obviously appropriate to the character who, as a self-proclaimed doctor, tinkers with people’s bodies in dubious and irreversible ways.

<sup>6</sup> It appears that the character of Robin, whom Grace teaches to read, write and count, is based on a young boy in Robin Island prison whom Nelson Mandela taught to read, write and count but who hanged himself. In revenge for Grace’s affection for Robin, Tinker force feeds him the chocolates he has bought for her and makes him burn his books. When he urinates from the stress of these events, Tinker makes him clean up the mess, effeminizing him with the comment «Clean it up, woman». Robin eventually hangs himself.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Kane *Cleansed* in Sarah Kane *Complete Plays* (2001). All page references in parentheses are to this edition.

**Voices** Dead, slag  
 She was having it off with her brother  
 Weren't he a bender? (131)

Such violence is then justified, as in a large number of rape cases, by the suggestion that the woman "asked for it"

**Voices** Gagging for it  
 Begging for it  
 Barking for it (132)

In the following scene, Grace is lying between Graham and Tinker with a hand in each of their hands. «My balls hurt», she exclaims to which Tinker retorts «You're a woman» and the Voices echo «Lunatic Grace». (134) The cycle is completed by the administration of an electric shock to Grace's brain to dissuade her further from her quest to become a man like her brother.

At the end of the play, Tinker performs a grim final physical transformation of Grace into Graham as he removes her breasts and sews on her a man's penis. Dan Rebellato (Rebellato, 2008: 197) describes this violent image in prototypical queer terms as «an image of the almost limitless plasticity of the body, its permeability, interchangeability and the irrelevance of the «natural» or «organic» wholeness of the «original» human form». Yet the fragility of Grace's new body in the face of the violence done to it, however much the transformation might itself have been desired by her, emphasizes not only the violence involved in the assumption of any gendered identity, even a transsexual one, but also the ways in which women who wish to undergo such sex change operations for their own psychological or physiological reasons are subject to the whims and caprices of unaccountable doctors like Tinker with the power to effect irreversible physical transformations on their bodies with or without their consent and "for their own good".

The penis which Tinker has sewn on to Grace is removed from Carl, the lover of Rod, both of whom have found themselves in the institution, apparently for no other reason than their queer desire for each other. As Tinker reveals his misogyny in his re-remembering of Grace, he dismembers the body of Carl with homophobic delight as he is consistently beaten and mutilated. Yet as the physical violations continue and accumulate, the love between the two men grows and transcends them. At the beginning of the play, Carl voices many of the typical lover's clichés such as «I will never lie to you» and «I will love you for ever», to which Rod replies honestly «I love you *now*. I'm with you *now*. I'll do my best, moment to moment, not to betray you. Now. That's it. No more. Don't make me lie to you». (111) Despite promising here to die for Rod, when Carl is later faced with the prospect of horrendous anal torture, similar to the crucifixion techniques used by Bosnian soldiers on Muslims, he breaks down and begs Tinker to torture Rod rather than him. Nevertheless, Rod forgives Carl's betrayal and the

two men attempt to replace the clichéd words of love with actions that express their love for each other in ways that lie beyond the gender and sexual clichés which define even queer love. Each time they come closer together physically, Tinker intervenes with violence. He cuts off in turn Carl's tongue, his arms and then his legs. As several commentators have noted, Rod's immediate reaction to the dismemberment of his lover is laughter. Yet as Ken Urban (Urban, 2008: 165) points out in his aptly titled «The Body's Cruel Joke» «(t)he laughs that Kane's work induces in an audience stick in the throat, no sooner uttered than silenced by shock» The violence is certainly grotesque, but the reaction of those who witness the violence is no less grotesque. Indeed, Kane seems to place the audience deliberately in the position of *voyeur* in such instances only to shock them into recognition of the ethical consequences of their complicity with onstage violence.

Eventually, Tinker offers Rod the choice of dying himself or watching Carl die. Rod chooses to have his own throat cut, but before he dies, the process of mutual understanding that forms the basis of the love the two men have fought to redefine outside the norm comes full circle as Carl recognises that all that really exists in love is the present moment, while Rod makes the lover's declaration he had earlier denied Carl «I will always love you. I will never lie to you. I will never betray you. On my life». (142) In the final scene of the play, Carl wakes to find Tinker has removed his penis to sew onto Grace and that he has been dressed in Grace's woman's clothes. He howls in outrage, but the final image of the play, as Grace and Carl hug and console each other, putting an end to Carl's tears as they smile and as the rain turns into sunshine, suggests their shared visceral suffering at the hands of the representatives and institutions of compulsory heteronormativity has brought with it not only an understanding of love in its complexity, which bears little relation to love as conventionally defined in heteropatriarchy, but also of the need for those labelled sexual dissidents to find ways in which they can reach out to each other and offer some form of understanding and compassion to others whose individual desires bring them into conflict with social constraints.

The third narrative in the play involves Tinker and a nameless woman who strips for him in a peep show booth as he feeds tokens into a slot and masturbates in front of her. At the beginning, this appears to be a fixed, unbalanced, exploitative gender relationship between a man who pays for sexual gratification and a woman whose nameless body is objectified and commodified for money and male desire. The first sign that there is a human element involved in this scenario occurs when it becomes clear that Tinker is projecting his feelings of desire for Grace onto the nameless woman. He even calls her by her name. With the repetition of each peep show episode, where Tinker pays for the woman to dance in front of him for his own sexual gratification, the power balance between the two begins to change subtly but definitively. Tinker offers to help the woman, but she is initially suspicious of this. However, in a climactic, cathartic moment, as Tinker realises that Grace is escaping him in her quest to

become her brother, he unleashes a torrent of verbal abuse at the woman and demands that she open her legs and touch his penis to prove that «she» (and here the nameless woman “stands in” for Grace) is really a woman. Tinker’s violence reduces the woman to tears amid protestations that she thought he loved her, but the outburst seems to lay the ghost of his desire for Grace in Tinker and provide a new opportunity for a tender, compassionate relationship between Tinker and the woman to emerge. In a beautifully crafted final scene between the two, Tinker allows himself to be vulnerable as he rests his head between the woman’s breasts. With the woman now controlling the man who earlier defined the terms of their unequal relationship, they make love. There is even a moment when Tinker worries that he might be hurting his sexual partner until she reassures him that the experience is as rewarding for her as it is for him in graphically sexual terms. It is a potentially complex process to suggest a male sadist can be transformed into a sensitive male lover and that an exploitative relationship based on the commodification of a woman’s body can be transformed into a loving sexual partnership. Yet the manner in which Tinker’s anger against women and his non-acceptance of his rejection by Grace eventually gives way to the psychological and physical vulnerability which has underlined these earlier forms of behaviour is both psychologically convincing and delicately portrayed. Rather than simply suggesting in a clichéd fashion that behind every male sadist there is a vulnerable child, these episodes illustrate the difficulty of constructing balanced, equal relationships between men and women in general. They illustrate how gender inequalities and threats of physical and psychological violence by men against women mine the possibility of love between the sexes. Yet they also portray the difficult, but necessary processes by which men and women attempt to construct relationships that are at least based on a recognition of the difficulties involved and their concrete steps to attempt to create genuinely egalitarian relationships between the sexes.

The play reveals love to be the place where gender and sexual norms operate most ferociously, combining social coercion with threats of physical and psychological violence. Yet if love is the supreme site of gender and sexual conformity, reinforced by the threat of sexual violence, it is also the site of supreme transgression of such conformity in that experiences of extreme love, whether between dead brother and living sister, two queer men or between male sadist and female victim, recast gender and sexual norms to such an extent that they become unrecognisable. Such alternatives are constructed in opposition to sexual violence but also through it, a paradox that is marked on their ambiguously sexed and gendered bodies. If sexual normalcy involves the imposition of individual pain and suffering, therefore, what Judith Butler labels «enabling disruptions» to the citation of norms of gender and sexuality are themselves by no means free from episodes of pain and suffering.

Given that *Cleansed* focuses so intensely on violence as a metaphor for the assumption of gendered and sexual identities, it might seem surprising that Kane

herself tended to distance herself from queer and feminist categorisation. When questioned on this point (Kane *apud* Saunders, 2002: 30, 32), she provided the following answer:

When people talk about me as a writer, that's what I am and that's how I want my work to be judged – on its quality, not on the basis of my age, gender, class, sexuality or race<sup>8</sup>.

She also made the following comment on gender roles:

I don't think of the world as being divided up into men and women, victim and perpetrators. I don't think those are constructive divisions to make, and they make for poor writing.

The first quote represents an acknowledgment that being labelled as a feminist or queer writer can lead to a process of ghettoisation where the value of a work of art in its totality and complexity is reduced to what the writer is or says on a limited range of subjects. Yet the second quote points towards a queer vision of gender which unsettles firm distinctions between men as agents of oppression and women as their perennial victims. Indeed, such a notion of no essential, foundational distinction between men and women is fully in line with Butler's outlining of gender performativity where the illusion of a stable gender identity is the effect rather than the cause of gender norms. This is not to say, as *Cleansed* makes clear, that there are not concrete consequences in the way men and women are forced into gender-specific roles and forms of behaviour which include violence against women as a manifestation of extreme inequality between the sexes. It is just that such processes are not fixed and immutable and people can and do contest them, however painful the consequences of this contestation may turn out to be. This is particularly true for those who experience the heightened emotions of love. Therefore, rather than dismiss Kane's reluctance to be acknowledged as a queer or feminist playwright as an example of political bad faith or a failure of radical consciousness, it should be seen as an awareness that if gender and sexuality are genuinely performative, this also means they are characterised by a potential for extreme mobility and bodily reconfiguration that renders barriers between men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals endlessly porous. This, for me, is a radical queer position, where notions of stable gender and sexual identities cease to have any essential significance except for those who wish to force women to continue as the victims of men and queers to retain fewer rights than heterosexuals. Kane's extremism is thus a manifestation of her idealism, in the sense that she asks her audiences not

---

<sup>8</sup> Both these quotations are taken from an interview with Natasha Langridge & Heidi Stephenson (1997).



merely to empathise with all those who are the victims of oppression but to dismantle entirely the structures of power that make people victims at all and to replace them with a society of possibilities and permutations where the psychology of the individual is allowed free expression unconstrained by the limits and confines of sexual norms. Yet she also remains painfully aware of the distance between this idealism and the realities of oppression. As she herself made clear in interview (Langridge & Stephenson (1997) with her violence, Kane is making a statement about patriarchy: «Class, race and gender divisions are symptomatic of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause». Thus an end to violence is intimately linked in her plays with the ending of gender, sexual and other forms of oppression.

### Works cited

- Barthes, Roland (1979), *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, New York, Hill & Wang. Translation from the French by Richard Howard.
- Butler, Judith (1997), «Against Proper Objects» in Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor (eds.) *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1-31.
- Butler, Judith (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (1993), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of «Sex»*, New York, Routledge.
- Churchill, Caryl (1989), *Cloud Nine*, London, Nick Hern Books.
- Churchill, Caryl (2002), *Caryl Churchill: Sétimo Céu/Uma Boca Cheia de Pássaros/Distante*, Translations of the plays by Paulo Eduardo Carvalho, Porto, Campo das Letras.
- Hall, Donald E. (2003), *Queer Theories*, Basingstoke & New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kane, Sarah (1998), *Cleansed* in Sarah Kane (org.), *Complete Plays*, London, Methuen, 105-151.
- Kushner, Tony (2007), *Angels in America: Parts One and Two*, London, Nick Hern Books.
- Langridge, Natasha & Stephenson, Heidi (1997), *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting*, London, Methuen.
- Marques, Pedro (2001), *Teatro Completo: Sarah Kane*, Porto, Campo das Letras.
- Ravenhill, Mark (2006), *The Cut and Product*, London, Methuen & Co.
- Rebellato, Dan (2008), «Because it Feels Fucking Amazing: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation», in Graham Saunders & Rebecca d'Monté (eds.), *Cool Britannia: British Political Drama in the 1990's*, Basingstoke & New York, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Saunders, Graham (2002), *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Tabert, Nils (1998), «Gespräch mit Sarah Kane» in Nils Tabert (ed.), *Playspotting: Die Londoner Theaterszene der 90er*, 8-21.
- Urban, Ken (2008), «The Body's Cruel Joke», in Nadine Holdsworth & Mary Luckhurst (eds.), *A Concise Companion to British and Irish Drama*, Malden, Oxford & Victoria, Blackwell.
- Weed, Elizabeth (1997), «Introduction» in Elizabeth Weed & Naomi Schor (eds.), *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, vii-xiii.

**Francesca Rayner** é Professora Auxiliar na Universidade do Minho, onde lecciona unidades curriculares em Teatro e *Performance*. É doutorada em Ciências de Literatura (Literatura Inglesa) e a sua tese de doutoramento «Caught in the Act: A Representação da Transgressão Sexual em Três Produções Portuguesas de Shakespeare» foi publicada pelo Centro de Estudos Humanísticos da Universidade em 2006. A sua investigação explora as interligações entre género, sexualidade e *performance*.

*Artigo recebido em 26 de Abril de 2009 e aceite para publicação em 06 de Novembro de 2009.*