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This reading of Sarah Kane's five plays analyses the way they divide into two radically different theatre styles, which imply two different architectures, one based on violence, the other on linguistic techniques. *Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love* and *Cleansed* come under the first type of structure, with extremes of cruelty, while *Crave* and *4:48 Psychosis* are built upon verbal devices of all kinds and appear as real word-feats, which make the drama.

Those of us who did not know Sarah Kane owe her the tribute of examining her drama dispassionately. In less than five years she wrote five plays about love, which should be published in a single volume. One of her plays is a free adaptation of Seneca's *Phaedra*, which she retitled *Phaedra's Love*. Her other four highly original plays divide neatly into her two radically different theatre styles, which might be summarized as violent and linguistic. Each style enfolds a different architecture.

The violent plays build to corpse-strewn finales. The explosive, past-participle title of her first play, *Blasted*, (whose slang meaning is drunk, or drugged) occurs only in a scenic direction: "The hotel has been blasted by a mortar bomb." We might be reading our daily newspaper, which was in fact the main source of Kane's catalogue of cruelties. However, reviewers did not object to bombs; instead, they raised an outcry about the enactment of rape, fellatio, defecation, masturbation, and cannibalism. In 1995, tabloid journalists (like Jack Tinker of *The Daily Mail*) moved Kane's first play from the theatre page into local London news. I return it to the theatre context for which it was intended.

Into an expensive Leeds hotel-room come the tabloid journalist Ian and his unemployed ex-lover Cate. The former, age 45, suffers from lung cancer, and he is determined to drink, smoke, and fuck his way to death: "Enjoy myself while I'm here." The latter, age 21, is an innocent who stutters when stressed, and who has unprovoked fits in which she appears to be dead while her mind roams. Their meeting, it is gradually revealed, takes place during a war. Between scenes 1 and 2, Ian rapes Cate, and her revenge is to rip out the sleeves of his leather jacket. Locking herself in the bathroom, Cate jumps out the window when a soldier breaks the door down. The nameless soldier eats Ian's eyes after raping him. When Cate returns with a crying baby, the soldier has shot himself. Cate leaves in search of food, and blind Ian eats the dead baby before burying himself. Cate returns with food, which she shares with the dying Ian. His "thank you" are the play's last words.

Kane's architecture is displayed in two parallel plot-lines, through which these horrors accumulate. The racist, sadistic, homophobic Ian suffers a more extreme form of his own violence at the hands of the anonymous soldier, and the generous friendliness of the vegetarian Cate gives way under duress to survival tactics. Although Kane's five scenes are discontinuous, their harrowing details build climactically: Ian immediately reveals his racism — "Tip that wog" — more slowly his homophobia — "You look like a lesbos" — and finally his cruelty to Cate, who cries: "Go on, shoot me. Can't be no worse than what you've done

already." After the hotel is blasted, Ian watches while the soldier drinks the last of his gin. When the soldier describes his brutalisation of the enemy, Ian protests: "Not like that." Forced to imagine killing an enemy woman, Ian "looks sick," but he "nods." The soldier resumes his account of atrocities, and he sneers at Ian: "Some journalist, that's your job." When Ian insists that his articles must be "personal," the soldier rapes him and eats his eyes. Before Ian himself succumbs to cannibalism, he pleads with Cate to kill him, even while arguing against her faith in God. When Cate goes out to trade sex for food, Ian can still protest. Alone on stage, Ian is seen in a slow strobe-effect — masturbating, strangling himself, shitting, laughing hysterically, having a nightmare, crying bloody tears and hugging the dead soldier, lying very still. Only then — after a virtual reliving of his life — does Ian unbury the baby to eat it. He then buries himself "head poking out of the floor." After Cate feeds him, Ian "dies with relief." His fear of and bravado about death terminate in the stage fact.

Cate sucks her thumb near the beginning and at the end of *Blasted*; despite her dreadful adventures, she remains a childlike innocent. In scene 1 we learn that Cate answered Ian's call, even after he abandoned her, because he "sounded unhappy." She dislikes his racist epithets, is nauseated by ham sandwiches, tries to discourage Ian from gin and cigarettes, and they converse amiably about whether one could shoot the other: "It's wrong to kill." Cate has a new boyfriend and resists Ian's advances. scene 1 closes when he bestows the hotel bouquet upon her. As scene 2 opens, the flowers are scattered, and at dawn Ian reaches for gin and a cigarette. While Ian showers, Cate rips the arms off his leather jacket. She methodically arouses him in order to bite his erect penis; afterwards she brushes her teeth. Although Ian pleads that Cate stay with him, she is wounded physically and emotionally, so she vows to go home after a bath. Absent during scene 3, Cate returns in scene 4 with the baby. Ian focuses on his pitiable blindness, but Cate focuses on the crying baby. When she realizes the baby has died, she laughs hysterically. As scene 5 opens, Cate buries the baby under the floorboards, adorning the grave with a makeshift cross, a few residual flowers, and her improvised prayer. Absent during Ian's strobe-lit theatrical moments, Cate returns with bread, sausage, gin — and "blood seeping from between her legs." Cate sits next to Ian's head, and after "she eats her fill of the sausage and bread, then washes it down with gin," she feeds him and "pours gin in Ian's mouth." But she sits alone, while Ian dies. Cate has indulged in gin, sausage, and bartered sex, but the play is noncommittal as to whether these lapses will insure her survival. Yet Cate's generosity survives in the food she offers Ian, whereas he dies, a victim of more extreme cruelty than his own. Kane has built *Blasted* on parallel but counterpointed narratives.

Kane turned to adaptation on a fellowship in New York, where she tried to escape the notoriety conferred on her by *Blasted*. *Phaedra's Love* (1996) draws on Seneca, rather than Euripides, in that the gods are nowhere in sight. On the other hand, Kane resembles Euripides in dwelling on Hippolytus, but it is a very different Hippolytus from the chaste youth of Greek legend. Kane's play, built in nine increasingly violent scenes, is set in and near a royal palace in an unnamed country much like modern Britain. The characters are based on Seneca, except that the Nurse gives way to Phaedra's daughter Strophe, whose father is unknown. (There is no Messenger, and the Chorus disperses into such anonymous characters as a doctor, a priest, and individual members of the bloodthirsty mob).

Scene 1 is wordless. Hippolytus, surrounded by socks, underwear, and empty paper wrappers, watches a violent film on television. Impassively, he blows his nose into one sock, masturbates unpleasurably into another, while intermittently munching on a hamburger. In scene 2 Phaedra consults a doctor about her stepson's "depression"; to no avail. The opening silent scene has been followed by an all-dialogue scene. Only in scene 3, another dialogue, does Kane revert to a semblance of Greek myth, when Phaedra confesses her obsessive love to her daughter Strophe. The latter is one of many women who have slept with Hippolytus,

and she advises her mother to keep her infatuation secret: “he’s a sexual disaster area.” In scene 4, which takes place on Hippolytus’s birthday, he greets Phaedra with the question: “When was the last time you had a fuck?” Evasively, she turns the question back to him, and he responds with details. Phaedra bridles when he calls her Mother, and Hippolytus snaps back at her: “Why shouldn’t I call you mother, Mother? I thought that’s what was required. One big happy family. The only popular royals ever. Or does it make you feel old?” In spite of Hippolytus’s stinging question, Phaedra confesses her love to him. Although he sends her away, she performs fellatio on him, and he then criticizes her technique. Revealing that both he and Theseus have slept with Strophe, Hippolytus is indifferent to Phaedra’s fury: “She’s less passionate but more practiced. I go for technique every time.” Hippolytus then advises Phaedra to see a doctor because he has gonorrhoea. Upon leaving, Phaedra asks Hippolytus why he hates her. Her question marks the last time Phaedra speaks in Kane’s play, and Hippolytus’s answer is: “Because you hate yourself.”

By scene 5, Phaedra has accused Hippolytus of rape before hanging herself, and Strophe reports to him that the populace is up in arms. Hippolytus seems pleased: “Me. A rapist. Things are looking up […]. At the very least it’s not boring […]. A rapist. Better than a fat boy who fucks […]. She died doing this for me. I’m doomed.”

Exhilarated, Hippolytus is at last aroused from apathy, and he refuses Strophe’s pleas to flee. Admitting to her that he did not rape Phaedra, Hippolytus nevertheless turns himself in. After the emotional turmoil of this scene, Kane dedicates scene 6 to a Priest-Hippolytus duologue in the latter’s prison-cell; it climaxes when the Priest “performs oral sex on Hippolytus.” The prince speaks gently after this repetition of Phaedra’s gesture: “Go. Confess. Before you burn.” Scene 7 shows the ruler of the country, Theseus, at Phaedra’s funeral pyre. He utters the only words in the scene: “I’ll kill him.” Yet, literally, he does not do so.

In the final scene of the play, Kane replaces Poseidon’s monster with a howling mob, among whom Theseus and Strophe mingle in disguise. The former inflames his countrymen, and Hippolytus eludes his guards to fling himself into the crowd. He recognizes Theseus, who kisses him before pushing him towards his killers. As Hippolytus is strangled into semi-consciousness, Strophe cries out in his defense. Theseus rapes her and cuts her throat. Dying, she reveals the truth: “Theseus. Hippolytus. Innocent. Mother. Oh, Mother.” The crowd and Theseus mutilate Hippolytus, who identifies the disguised Strophe. Theseus, in contrition, cuts his own throat. Theseus, the ruler of the country, is responsible for the three bodies on stage, and Hippolytus welcomes the vulture who hovers over him: “If there could have been more moments like this.” Finally, Phaedra’s love has rescued Hippolytus from the tedium that depressed him. Not unlike Camus’s Caligula, Kane’s Hippolytus prefers honest cruelty to the hypocrisy of royal indulgence and conformity. Kane’s “adaptation” (which she also directed) builds in intensity to its murderous finale, which sets legendary (and offstage) events front and center. Despite Kane’s invention of an active step-sister to contrast with the passive Hippolytus, *Phaedra’s Love* seems to me Kane’s weakest play architecturally.

Still fleeing notoriety after the 1996 production of *Phaedra’s Love*, Kane immersed herself in the writers workshop of the Paines Plough Theatre Company. When a member of the workshop dropped out three days before readings, Kane substituted for her under the pseudonym of Marie Kelvedon. In three busy days she produced a first version of *Crave*. Kane revised it over the next year, and it reached the stage a few months after *Cleansed*, in 1998. The latter play is leaner and crueller than *Blasted* or *Phaedra’s Love,* with more numerous and more complex characters. For all the power of *Blasted*, it is flawed: Ian’s hatred of his ex-wife and adult son are too antonymic with Cate’s devotion to her mother and feeble-minded brother; Cate’s “fits” serve no dramatic purpose; the anonymous soldier talks too much about his violence; yet his unseen suicide is not convincing. Neither the doctor nor the priest is functional in *Phaedra’s Love*, and Hippolytus’s lost love Lena sounds a rare

sentimental note. The meaning of *Cleansed*, however, might be extended to its stripped down dialogue and spare architectonics.

Parallel plot-lines pulse through twenty swift scenes. The setting is a fenced university campus, although several reviewers understandably mistook it for a concentration camp. The action begins outdoors where (the ironically named) Tinker kills Graham with an overdose of heroin shot into his eye, and where Rod and Carl exchange rings. In the White Room, or sanitarium, Graham's sister Grace exchanges clothes with Robin, who wears the clothes of dead Graham. In the Red Room, Tinker orders Carl to be beaten and tortured, climaxed by swallowing his ring after his tongue has been cut off. Back in the White Room, Grace and a resurrected or fantasised Graham make love. In the Black Room, Tinker masturbates while looking at a Woman in a peepshow, whom he addresses as Grace. Within the perimeter of the university, with its self-proclaimed liberalism, three plot-strands have been introduced, all displaying illicit love — homosexual, incestuous, and commercial.

In the complex seventh scene, the first to take place in the Round Room or university library, Graham and Robin (still in Grace's clothes) utter words of love to Grace, sometimes together although oblivious of one another. At the end of the scene Tinker burns Robin's drawing of a flower: "She smells like a flower." All the love affairs lead to torture and death: Carl's hands and then his feet are cut off and fed to rats; Rod's throat is cut; the Peepshow Woman pleads for Tinker's help but is brutalized by him; after Grace is beaten unconscious, she is electroshocked into tranquillity; Robin hangs himself with Grace's tights, and Graham holds on to his legs; Tinker mutilates the genitals of Grace and Carl; the Woman in the peepshow makes love to Tinker and calls herself Grace. In the final scene Grace / Graham and Carl, with rats gnawing at their wounds, reach out to one another; Carl is crying, but the rain stops, causing Grace / Graham to smile. "The sun gets brighter and brighter, the squeaking of the rats louder and louder, until the light is blinding and the sound deafening. Blackout." I have summarized the lovelorn finales swiftly, whereas Kane takes her theatrical time to build each tender, catastrophic structure.

Love is a dangerous emotion, but Grace / Graham and Carl may finally risk it. Despite the corpses along the way, they have not been "cleansed" — a word that is never spoken in the play. At the last, the stage is peopled by two residual members of loving couples; Carl offers his stump to the bereft Grace / Graham, whereas Tinker and his bought lover were confined to a peepshow. Except for the rats, *Cleansed* ends on the only quiescent finale of Kane's three carefully plotted plays of violence. Perhaps there was a spillover effect from *Crave*, upon which she worked at the same time.

Crave is not only a linguistic play in its emphasis, but also in its paucity of scenic directions and its abundance of dialogue. Even the four characters are virtually anonymous, designated as they are by letters — A, B, C, and M. The jacket blurb of *Crave* explains it as "the disintegration of a human mind under the pressures of love, loss and desire." However, **four** characters interact in *Crave*, and they emerge as distinct personalities, who should not be reduced to "**a** human mind." Given their disjunctive remarks, a director has great latitude as to who addresses whom. Disdaining the plot-lines of her earlier plays, Kane contours two May-January relationships: that of the old man A and the young woman C; that of the young man B and the middle-aged woman M. A, a self-proclaimed paedophile, has exposed himself to his grand-daughter C in a parked car, and both are marked by the experience, which Kane emphasizes by the unusual word "hurtling":

> C And has been hurtling away from that moment ever since.
> A I shudder with grief for that moment which I've been hurtling away from ever since.

The affair of B and M seems more casual, the former attracted to an older woman, who wants a child. All four characters crave love, which is also an affliction. The title is heard in a single imaged speech of C: "I crave white on white and black, but my thoughts race in glorious

technicolour, prodding me awake, whipping away the warm blanket of invisibility every time it swears to smother my mind in nothing."

The "glorious technicolour" of Kane's *Crave* is composed of her epigrammatic flair and such verbal techniques as rhyme, meter, fragmentation, contradiction, yes-no sequences, macaronics, quotation, and occasional word-awareness. These devices are pervasive, and they recur in various blends, which are often infused with humor. For example, rhyme may be heard in a single line — C's "Assimilated but not obliterated."; or it may appear in a couplet:

B She wants a kid yesterday.
A What will I do when you throw me away?

Or rhyme may be delayed and unaccented:

B Are you a lesbian?
M Oh please.
B I thought that might be why you don't have children."

Sustained metrical lines are rare, but stanzaic effects are frequent:

C Looks like a German,
A Talks like a Spaniard,
C Smokes like a Serb.

Or:

C Leave.
B Where?
C Now.
M There.

The first "stanza" prepares us for the macaronic lines which are heard at approximately equal intervals — one of Kane's dramatic girders. Of the seven utterances in foreign languages, three are Spanish, two German, and two Serb; all are uttered by B, who therefore talks not only "like a Spaniard." The second "stanza" contains rhyming words which differ in pitch, since "Where?" is a question and "There" a reply.

Kane's most frequent scenic direction in *Crave* is "A beat." with which, in her longest Yes-No sequence, she separates stanzas; the Yes's and No's follow a different order in three consecutive stanzas, but each group of seven syllables is always punctuated by a beat. The fourth stanza is composed of seven "short one-syllable screams," and it too ends in a beat. Three yes-no sequences are the most blatant forms of contradiction in *Crave*, but there are others, early and late in the play:

C LEAVE.
A COME BACK.
M Couldn't love you less.
B Couldn't love you more.

Even in the context of other verbal devices, it is evident that repetition confers stress. C opens the play with the line: "You're dead to me," and she speaks it three more times, without ever clarifying who is dead. B and M protest several times: "It's just not me." B and C both cast M in the role of their mother. B and C both reiterate: "I feel nothing, nothing. I feel nothing." And they vary with this: "I did nothing, nothing. I did nothing." Both verbs are belied in other lines. Only twice do the four characters speak together. Early in the play they say: "STAY" but late in the play they say: "Forget." Perhaps only by forgetting can craving be banished.

Most of my quotations lack images, but Kane provides occasional striking images for the ecstasies and cruelties of love:

A The scream of a daffodil.
M The stain of a scream.
C Waves sob like a pulse.

Although most of the dialogue exchanges are short, the paedophile A has an extended speech — two pages in print and at least two minutes in stage time. Probably influenced by Lucky's monologue in *Godot*, A gives vent to an asyntactical rush of everyday clichés about the cravings of love, which terminate, however, in a series of progressive polysyllables: "[…]

somehow somehow somehow communicate some of the/overwhelming undying overpowering unconditional all-encompassing heart-enriching mind-expanding on-going never-ending love I have for you." At the slash mark C accompanies A with repetitions of: "this has to stop."

Instead of the build through cruelties of the violent plays, Kane in *Crave* builds with verbal devices, including quotation. (In her next play, she will use the phrase "literary kleptomaniac.") At least four lines (spoken by B and M) are drawn from Eliot's *Wasteland,* and this is reinforced by imagery of drought and bones. About ten minutes before the end of the play C utters five lines that recall the biblical Book of Job, without actual quotation: "Let the day perish in which I was born / Let the blackness of the night terrify it / Let the stars of its dawn be dark / May it not see the eyelids of the morning / Because it did not shut the door of my mother's womb." (p. 37) From that point to the end of the play the contemporary language is infiltrated by such biblical lines as A's "But God has blessed me with the mark of Cain" or his "Glory be to the Father," or his "Which passeth all understanding." In the closing lines of the play A's "World without end" precedes M's "Glorious. Glorious" and B's "And ever shall be." But it is C who speaks the last words of the play: "Happy and free." One of C's earliest lines was: "If I could be free of you without having to lose you." Perhaps by the end she has accomplished this. Perhaps not.

In this dialogue-driven play, a few lines call attention to the very words that compose them. Before half the play is over A remarks in frustration: "I don't have music, Christ I wish I had music but all I have is words." Many minutes later C expresses deeper frustration: "I hate these words that keep me alive. I hate these words that won't let me die," and B completes her sentence: "expressing my pain without easing it." Near the end of the play, A, the polyglot, speaks about language: "And don't forget that poetry is language for its own sake. Don't forget when different words are sanctioned, other attitudes required.[sic] Don't forget decorum. Don't forget decorum." At the very end, however, decorum **is** forgotten, in a return to biblical rhythms, which give way to C's final, perhaps ironic: "Happy and free."

The architecture of *Crave* is complex. The two love affairs are not sufficiently defined to be called plot-strands; perhaps plot-shades is a more accurate word. And it is words, rather than incidents, that build the work. Macaronic lines, recurrent repetitions, and wasteland imagery, thread through the whole, but the other verbal devices cement the structure.

C may serve as a link to Kane's last play *4:48 Psychosis*. In *Crave* C is sexually victimized; yet she rejects love as the cause of her grief: "I'm having a breakdown because I'm going to die." She alone "emits a formless cry of despair," perhaps after being hospitalised: "I'm not ill, I just know that life is not worth living." Although she intersperses these outbursts with witty lines, it is not clear who is the subject of her final "You're dead to me." Since the sentence lacks a period, she may be talking to herself — in one way to be happy and free. Or at least free.

To some extent C predicts the anonymous first-person protagonist of *4:48 Psychosis*, Kane's last play, although several reviewers classified it as a dramatic poem (or a suicide note), rather than a play. Typographically, it flouts dramatic form; there is no setting (as was also true of *Crave*), no indication of who speaks, and the few scenic directions almost always bear on silence. The text opens with "A very long silence," and it is several minutes before an "I" is uttered: "I had a night in which everything was revealed to me. How can I speak again?" Yet she does speak, or someone does — for about an hour. If the director of *Crave* is offered latitude as to the intercommunication of Kane's characters, the director of *4:48 Psychosis* compounds that latitude with that of deciding the number of actors, and who should speak which words. Kane's scenic indications of "Silence" or "A long silence" are proof that she heard the work in her mind's ear. Early in the text we hear: "How can I return to form/now my formal thought has gone?" Kane has nevertheless imposed form on suicidal thought,

perhaps occasioned by unrequited love. As the desire in Kane's *Crave* accumulated a resonance beyond that of her four initialed characters, the anxiety of *4:48 Psychosis* acquires a resonance beyond an individual tragedy.

For the first time a Kane title resounds in the text. Not specifically defined, 4:48 am is evidently the time when the human spirit is lowest, and five times we are warned of a suicide at that time, in an important girder of the textual structure. Not 4:45 or 4:50, much less five o'clock, but the unrounded time of the morning, when every desperate second counts. If 4:48 is an adjective modifying the noun psychosis, that is never stated in the text, and the word psychosis is heard only once, in its adjective form: "Patient discharged into the care of the community on arrival of acutely psychotic patient in emergency clinic in greater need of a hospital bed." Even in extremity Kane's gallows humor abides.

The slender plot is at once more fluid and more intense than that of *Crave*. One-sided love may be the cause of the speaker's depression, but the love-object or Other wavers between a (perhaps) male doctor and a female friend. Five duologues pit the patient against the doctor, but most of what is spoken takes different rhythms in a monologue. We early learn: "And my mind is the subject of these bewildered fragments." And the words "mind" and "soul" recur without embarrassment.

In exploring the anatomy of suffering, the speaker reuses verbal techniques of *Crave*:

Rhyme:

Remember the light and believe the light
An instant of clarity before eternal night

Contradiction:

I cannot be alone
I cannot be with others

Stanzas are frequent and varied:

Everything passes
Everything perishes
Everything palls
Unpleasant
unacceptable
uninspiring
impenetrable
Cut out my tongue
tear out my hair
cut off my limbs
but leave me my love
I would rather have lost my legs
pulled out my teeth
gouged out my eyes
than lost my love
the capture
the rapture
the rupture
of a soul

Literary quotation almost vanishes, although biblical rhythms and phrases remain. On the other hand, numbers enter the text — at first wildly, then diminishing from 100 by subtrahends of 7, and finally in doses of various medications, climaxing with the suicidal dose: "One hundred Lofepramine, forty five Zopiclone, twenty five Temazepam, and twenty Melleril" (I have no idea whether these are actual drugs, but their impact is devastating — despite, maybe because of, Kane's unconquerable humor.)

4:48 Psychosis englobes Kane's most prodigious word-feats, to which she calls attention only near the play's beginning — ironically. In the first doctor-patient duologue the latter complains: "I feel like I'm eighty years old. I'm tired of life and my mind wants to die." The doctor comments: "That's a metaphor, not reality." To which comes the nit-picking rejoinder:

“It’s a simile.” Strictly speaking, it is neither, since a simile compares two specifics, and a metaphor replaces one specific by another. A young woman feeling eighty years old is neither. When the duologue is over, the speaker returns to her woes, and to writing about them:

> An expressionist nag
> Stalling between two fools
> […] Last in a long line of literary kleptomaniacs
> (a time honoured tradition)

The evident item of kleptomania is the spoonerism for “falling between two stools,” but Kane stole the phrase “expressionist nag” from Alastair Macaulay’s unfavourable review of *Cleansed* in the *Financial Times*: “At her worst, however, she is an expressionist nag, and untheatrical.” Weapons flung at Kane can boomerang, as the reviewer Jack Tinker learned from the nefarious Tinker in *Cleansed*. It is, however, another sentence on the same page as Kane’s Macaulay theft that speaks more truly for her: “Just a word on a page and there is the drama.”

4:48 Psychosis is composed of many words spaced and formally combined on forty pages, and **there** is the drama. James Macdonald’s 2000 Royal Court production chose to confront us with three actors under Jeremy Herbert’s slanted mirror, so that we had a simultaneous exterior-interior view of the lover’s divorce between body and soul. And the director was faithful to Kane’s final optimistic note. Sporadically, in her linguistic plays Kane embraced the biblical metaphor of life as light. After a last despairing sentence — “It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind,” — a speaker utters the final, beautifully simple words of *4:48 Psychosis*: “please open the curtains.” Unspoken is the light that is admitted, but Kane’s five plays speak luminously in their different structures.