

CRITIQUING CAPITAL: EDWARD BOND'S *BINGO* (1973) AND SHAKESPEARE'S THE *MERCHANT OF VENICE* (1605)

In *Bingo* (1973), Edward Bond, a major twentieth-century British dramatist, radically re-imagines Shakespeare from a broadly neo-Marxist perspective. The play is located in the last years of Shakespeare's life. We encounter a writer wrestling with fundamental dialectics of ethics, economics and aesthetics. *Bingo* is a popular, twentieth century, working-class English game predicated on seemingly random chance with winning defined principally in monetary terms. It arguably shares some similar territory to Portia's caskets. Subtitled «Scenes of Money and Death» Bond's play interrogates a Shakespeare inextricably bound up ethically and economically in the machinations of nascent mercantile capitalism. This is contemporaneous to the writing and first production of *The Merchant of Venice*. The two principal secondary critical sources referred to in this essay are my own book *Edward Bond: A Critical Study*¹ and *The Merchant of Venice*, edited and introduced by John Drakakis².

This paper focuses upon Bond's characters of the Beggar Woman and Shakespeare's Shylock as «outsiders» defined principally by gender, class and ethnicity. Whilst Shakespeare and Shylock are, paradoxically, its beneficiaries, I shall propose that they are also marginalised hostages of capitalism with economic and moral implications. Whilst I am not proposing a reductive critical perspective of "authorial intention" in terms of the anti-Semitic characterisation and dramatic treatment of Shylock by Shakespeare, I shall argue that *The Merchant of Venice* em-

1 PETER BILLINGHAM, *Edward Bond: A Critical Study*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2014.

2 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE *The Merchant of Venice* Edited by JOHN DRAKAKIS, Bloomsbury, Arden Shakespeare, London 2014.

bodies a cultural materialist, symptomatic, analysis of critically repressed anxieties in early seventeenth century mercantile capitalism. Might capitalism itself be the true “villain of the piece” in *The Merchant of Venice*?



FIGURE 1: Patrick Stewart as Shylock in Edward Bond's *Bingo at the Young Vic* (2012)

In this context the Beggar Woman is readable as a form of Freudian parapraxis (more commonly referred to as a “Freudian slip”: an *unconscious disclosure*) from the collective unconscious of both Venetian and English early seventeenth century society. Kristeva argues that «the archaic ... self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal»³. The economically marginalised Beggar Woman and the cash-advantaged Shylock function as an unlikely dialectic of a parapraxis of disruptive characterisation. They share commonality as embodiments of critically destabilising, repressed anxieties within the dominant economic and moral narrative of that time. Shylock exemplifies both the fetishized “other” whilst simultaneously serving as an alarm bell for capitalism of the rupturing of its political/economic cohesion through the meta-semiotics of his insistence upon his bond from Antonio of the “pound of flesh” – a nightmarish motif of the commodified body. The Beggar Woman serves as a terrifying, “uncanny” (dis)embodiment of discarded Use Value: the “necessary price” and human cost of “value” under capitalism. With dark and tragic irony, she signifies the glimpsed, repressed expression of the homogenised “necessity” of exploited commodified labour.

3 JULIA KRISTEVA, *The Portable Kristeva*, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, 283.

Significantly, what predicates Shakespeare's radicalised understanding is his profound ontological re-seeing: a revolutionary "re-vision" of reality. This reflects a transformative incident from his past that Bond shared with me in conversation in 2007.

This incident happened in the 1950s when he had first arrived at army barracks to begin his then compulsory National Military Service. He has written elsewhere of the traumatising impact of being thrown into an environment which he found disorientating and oppressive. He recalled how he saw another soldier staring at him from across the crowded canteen. The other soldier's stare seemed inquisitorial: alien and yet strangely familiar. It was only then that Bond realised that the face staring at him was his own: a dirty cracked mirror on the canteen wall creating a fractured image of his alienated self, dehumanised by militarism. This is a potent example of the *doppelgänger* (literally "double-goer") – a ghostly Freudian "double" and personification of the *uncanny*. In the context of this paper's concerns it acts as a post-modern metaphor of the alienated author in relation to their work.

As John Drakakis (citing Simmel) identifies with forensic clarity in his Introduction to his Arden Shakespeare edition of *The Merchant of Venice*:

We need to connect the ambivalence concerning the increasingly complicated operation of the flow of money with the practice of displacing certain necessary economic activities onto alien, that is non-Christian, groups or 'strangers'. It is precisely at this period that the figure of the «stranger» comes into his own as a challenge to the social fabric of community ... money ceases to have a purely instrumental value as a *means* to an end, and assumes an overriding power as a 'final purpose' that governs 'practical consciousness' which now requires forms of legislation⁴.

Provocative questions are posed concerning concepts of "author/authority" and consequently the "authorised" reading of political, economic and cultural history. Shylock embodies a disturbing paradox central to emergent contract-based rather than custom-led capitalism, reinforcing the anti-Semitic stereotype of "the Jew" defined solely by money via unearned surplus value. Shakespeare nevertheless endows the character with an antithetical radical counter-argument in the fulfilment of his bond:

4 SHAKESPEARE, *Merchant*, 11.

SHYLOCK ...If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, heated my enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions [...] If you prick us do we not bleed? (3.1.47-58)

Simultaneously Bond robs his “Shakespeare” of a fixed, stable value as writer and citizen: the dominant cultural icon of universal, transcendent “value” and meaning.

In using this challenging post-modern, meta-theatrical strategy, Bond arguably critiques his *own* political and ethical function and moral *value* as author in relation to the political unrest of 1970s Britain which saw the ultimate triumph of Thatcherite monetarist fiscal policies against Leftist, oppositional activity. Far from authorial intention, his “Shakespeare” is mutable and conflicted – Implicated in the forced enclosure of formerly common land. This is historically documented fact – not Bond’s imagined scenario. By direct implication the attempts to identify, accommodate or rationalise authorial intention in the context of the endemic anti-Semitism within *The Merchant of Venice* is fundamentally problematised. These characters and others are rather ensnared by the disparities and contradictions of dramatic art and economic power.

Through this the seeming impregnability of Early Modern, Renaissance Venice is itself similarly challenged: deconstructed at a critical, dialectical disjuncture of its history. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Bingo* remain both thesis and antithesis anxiously awaiting resolution in our own troubled times of global economic crisis and the demonising of the racial and ethnic “other”. The geo-political foundations of Venice continue to shift and threaten to submerge beneath tourist-economy in geo-economic and environmental disequilibrium. Shylock still searches the Ghetto district for revenge – or justice? – whilst Shakespeare eyes his own fetishized commodity value in the tourist souvenirs of Stratford upon Avon.

How might one weigh justice when the human has itself become a commodity?

The following three citations might serve as a helpful framing device for the development of this paper’s argument and discourse:

- i) «In capitalist society, crime makes an honest man of you»⁵

5 Entry dated 2 July 1970 from Volume One of *Selections from the Notebooks of Edward Bond*, Edited and with an introduction by IAN STUART, Methuen, London 2000.

ii) «Everyone listens to money»⁶

iii) «[The Jews] are so blind that they not only practice usury – not to mention the other vices – but they teach that it is a right which God conferred on them through Moses. Thereby, as in all the other matters, they slander God most infamously»⁷.

Edward Bond is the advocate of the imperative necessity of a theatre whose central function is, as he said in a 2000 interview, «to recreate what it means to be human, to redefine our relationship with the world»⁸. The dramatist's problem, he added, is «how do you speak sanity to the insane»⁹. His work has often provoked controversy among critics and audiences, especially with seminal plays such as *Saved* (1965) in which a baby is stoned to death in its pram. The defining characteristics of Bond's theatre emerge out of a compelling interplay of heightened, textured—almost poetic—language and the impact of what he calls “theatre events” such as the stoning of the baby in *Saved* and the execution of the Beggar Woman in *Bingo*.

Bond has his Shakespeare, in committing suicide at the end of the play, enact a gesture of existential moral action. When money-value dominates and destroys lives, suicide may be seen as the sole means of signalling and exercising a radically alternative moral praxis. As Shakespeare awaits his imminent death, having swallowed the tablet of poison given to him as a “gift” by Ben Jonson, he anguishes «Was anything done»¹⁰?

As stated previously it was not only those perceived as “foreigners” or “aliens” (especially Catholics in Reformation England) who were ideologically manufactured as a “threat” in the early years of the seventeenth century, but also those increasingly large numbers of the rootless and wandering poor. Their suffering and plight represented a humanitarian catastrophe and a direct and “acceptable” consequence of economic “reform” and productive efficiency on the land. This was the begin-

6 EDWARD BOND, *Plays: 3 Bingo, The Fool, The Woman, Stone*, Methuen, London 1987, 19.

7 LUTHER, Martin Luther, ‘On the Jews and Their Lies’, 1543, trans. Martin H. Bertram, in *Luther's Works, Vol. 47*, Edited by Franklin Sherman, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1971.

8 BILLINGHAM, 21.

9 *Ibid*

10 BOND, 57.

ning of the enclosure of Common Land and associated increase of privatised cash profit. This destitute underclass is embodied and encapsulated in the character of the Beggar Woman. She is a homeless itinerant who like several thousand others migrated into a potentially subversive mass rural movement.

Bond uses an episodic, neo-Brechtian scene structure to expose the potentially devastating contradictions inherent within the rationale and structures of embryonic capitalism. Having made a financially shrewd investment in the popular theatre that produced his own work, Shakespeare has become a wealthy bourgeois who at the end of his working life, has brought a country property and land near Stratford upon Avon to live out his retirement.

Nevertheless, Bond does not indulge in a reductive and critical caricaturing of Shakespeare as intrinsically or deliberately corrupt or morally and economically complicit and self-interested. The interface between individualised consciousness and action and the values and power structure of a given society is both clear yet paradoxically complex. It might therefore be more accurate and appropriate to view Bond's construction of Shakespeare and the Beggar Woman and Shakespeare's delineation of Shylock as symptoms of socio-economic ethical corruption. Like a diseased body, there is a disturbing symbiosis between host, disease and victim (s) with each re-infecting and re-enforcing the other. In cultural materialist terms, most notably Raymond Williams' *Structure of Feeling*, these plays and characters may be seen to reflect contesting values and ways of organising experience shared by a generation within a culture and reflected in common. Given that this formation contests and exposes the proclaimed homogeneity of meaning by the dominant ideological discourse, the construction of character, plot and narrative is problematised by essentially a subversive disruption of reactionary consciousness.

Shakespeare expresses this underlying corrosive existential ennui and angst articulated by Antonio:

ANTONIO. In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born (1.1.1-4)

This existential angst transforms into moral and ideological alarm as expressed by Shakespeare.

SHAKESPEARE What does it cost to stay alive? I'm stupefied at the suffering I've seen. The shapes huddled in misery that twitch away when you step over them. What it costs to starve people [...] How can I go back to that? What can I do there? I talk to myself now. I know no one else will ever listen¹¹.

This speech is given enhanced power in the context of where it occurs in the play. Shakespeare has walked up onto the hills beyond Stratford and his home. Effectively crucified by the landowner Combe as the agent of the Elizabethan state, the dead and decomposing body of the Beggar Woman stares out across the world – our world – *at us*.

That world has punished her for her class and gender and alleged anti-social transgression through public execution. Significantly in terms of both *Bingo* and *The Merchant of Venice* her “crime” is substantially against property – the houses and grain barns of the landowning rich. She has entered Shakespeare’s garden in the opening scene of the play, a location communicating a deceptive oasis of calm and meditative retreat for Shakespeare from the world. With subtle dramatic economy and powerful tragic irony in terms of her ultimate fate, she signifies the commodification of the human, every bit as much as Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. They are both *structures of feeling* critiquing the capitalist market criteria of supply and need: of use and cash-surplus value.

The Beggar Woman has consented to have paid sex in return for a cash payment from the Old Man, Shakespeare’s gardener and husband to his housekeeper. Shakespeare offers her food which she has refused in preference for money. He also asks the Old Woman if there might not be “cast-off” clothes from his ailing (and unseen) wife to provide clean clothes for the itinerant traveller. If the manufactured materiality of clothes might be viewed as equivalent to the socio-ideological “dressing” of female identity, the Beggar Woman has her material needs “re-dressed”. Significantly it is only when Portia adopts a masculine disguise that her search for self-determination and personal freedom as a woman can also be “re-dressed”. In this, patriarchy affords both female characters a provisional “equivalence” regardless of class. The poor and marginalised don’t of course need the surplus-to-requirement cast-offs of the bourgeoisie to “redress” their exploited position.

The Beggar Woman understands experientially something far more immediate and pertinent to both her oppressed condition and her margi-

11 Ivi, 40.

nal chances of survival. She recognises the dynamic implications of the power of *money* and its invidious corruption under capitalism of everything it touches. Through her life on the streets and the economic primacy of her body as a fetishized commodity for transaction, she understands that money has a perversely “transcendent” value far beyond food.

In Mark Neocleous’ essay *The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx’s Vampires* (2003) he writes with forensic clarity about the ways in which Marx’s use of the metaphor of vampires and vampirism «can be properly understood only in the critique of political economy and, in particular, the political economy of the dead»¹². In *Capital* Marx employs a vividly rhetorical expression of almost *Grand Guignol* theatricality: «If money comes into the world with a congenital blood-stain on one cheek, then capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt»¹³. Neocleous proceeds to discuss and deconstruct this lurid but compelling metaphor citing Terrell Carver’s *Making Capital out of Vampires*: «Marx claims that capital is dead labour which, vampire like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks»¹⁴.



FIGURE 2: power of money as a ‘final purpose’

This is central to the “currency” (or value) of “currency” within mercantile capitalism’s *modus operandi*. Capitalism identifies and generates a commodity-value of bread or a woman’s body which takes on a deeper, psycho-corporeal “transcendent” value echoing the symbolic li-

12 NEOCLEOUS, M. (2003). *The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx’s Vampires*. *History of Political Thought* 24 (4): 668-684, 680.

13 NEOCLEOUS, 668

14 NEOCLEOUS, 678-9.

turgical elements of the Christian Mass or Eucharist. Through the interface of profit-value and use-value she embodies corporeally and ideologically this crucial dialectic. The *dismemberment* of her body through public execution and death is simultaneously a complex ideological signifier of (her) "dead labour" which, located in the serial act of casual sexual intercourse with strangers, defines and condemns her as a commodified body for which capitalism recognises a transient use-value. However, it carries no potential for surplus profit beyond the exploitative transactions purchased by men. History can offer no "remembering" of her extinguished body and terminally diminished economic exchange-value, other than through the potential for historical revolutionary consciousness and change and the articulation of a future "dictatorship of the proletariat". Ultimately, in gender-political terms, Portia has only marginally more choice as a woman – she is the "prize" to her prospective suitors in a version of "Bingo". Furthermore, her body – like that of The Beggar Woman – will see its Use-Value migrate into Cash Value in Portia's case through patriarchy's "sanctioning" of a problematic marriage to Bassanio.

Antonio and the Beggar Woman exemplify the financial and ethical consequences of the commodification of the human: an imminent and actual blood-drenched ideological corporeality. Marx's employment of the motif and metaphor of capitalism entering the world marked by blood assumes a remarkable prescience in terms of the negation of Shylock's bond and the human cost of the anticipated cash-profit value of land through its privatised enclosure and ownership.

Mercantile Venice could not exist without and indeed permitted and accommodated usury as a means of extending markets and profits. In this important respect Shylock is no more or no less guilty of the facilitation and growth of the "currency" than those such as Antonio who decry and discriminate against him:

In the *Merchant of Venice* both Antonio and the Jew are occupied in different but related branches of mercantilist practice, the one engaged in overseas trade and the other in facilitating the flow of capital through contractual means. Antonio is preoccupied with the process of exchange in which the relation between money and consumption and profit – what Marx would later call "use-value" and "exchange-value"¹⁵.

15 DRAKAKIS, 12.

Bond's Shakespeare can only retain his private land investments through the guaranteeing of their cash-value by Combe at the cost of Shakespeare being "bribed" by him to pay for Shakespeare's non-resistance to the enclosures. The historical Shakespeare bequeathed in his WILL TO COMBE THE GIFT OF A SILVER DISH.

«ALL THAT GLISTENS...?»

The Beggar Woman, arrested in Shakespeare's orchard after her post-coital liaison with the Old Man, is to be taken to the town square for a public whipping enforced by Combe who as well as powerful land-owner is also a legal magistrate and – ironically – in the English form of wording "Justice for the Peace". When she cries out for mercy, Combe tells her: «If there's something wrong with your head it'll do it good. Doctor's whip mad people»¹⁶.

Bond resists confining his characters as reductive ciphers of a crude historical determinism. He achieves this in large measure through his recognition that Shakespeare's dramatic imagination is not entirely or solely a symptom of class consciousness. Neither is it an innately subjective phenomenon in a post-Romantic concept of the artist and the visionary imagination. As Bond himself expresses it:

Imagination is more logical than pure reason because it is through material acts not by desires in the imagination that change is achieved. Imagination seeks reason and understanding [...] Art is not transcendental – nothing is¹⁷.

If art can offer no transcendent purpose, it can only function in an embodied materialist context. Portia's moral assertion of the primacy of "mercy" reads therefore as not only a rationale of her own privileged economic class perspective within a Christian/bourgeois ethical heterodoxy. It is also arguably a symptomatic *mea culpa* within the class consciousness of the dramatist who *authorises* not only her existence but the socio-economic world of which the play is a cultural product. As Shakespeare stands in front of the decaying, "crucified" body of the executed Beggar Woman, her fetishized body exposes the futile absence of mercy:

¹⁶ BOND, 23.

¹⁷ Ivi, 168-169.

a currency clearly operating on a strict supply and demand basis: a lottery game of Bingo.

Bond states: «You may recognise others only when you can recognise yourself. In drama this is possible – in drama we may meet and recognise ourselves in the gap»¹⁸.

This «gap» may be read as a paradigmatic expression of how human beings may know themselves and know one another more truly through drama. The materiality of the imagination is facilitated and revealed by the socio-cultural, economic means of theatrical production.

SHAKESPEARE There's no higher wisdom of silence. No face brooding over the water. No hand leading the waves to the shore as if its saving a dog from the sea [...] No other hand...no face... just these¹⁹.

Might Portia also, in crossing the Rialto Bridge, catch her own reflection in the accusing, imploratory stare of the twenty-first century female Bosnian refugee, begging for alms? What could she, the wealthy legal executive, offer today's Beggar Woman: mercy? What could that purchase her amongst the Carnival Masque souvenir mementos? Could Antonio, gambling all or nothing in a bar on the Grand Canal's water-side, inadvertently glimpse himself in the world-weary demeanour of the hurrying venture capitalist, late for a crucial appointment in the Ghetto district. A meeting at which shares might crash and lives be ruined?

In this paper I have sought to use *Bingo* as a post-modern investigative paradigm for a strategic analysis of *The Merchant of Venice*. These two plays exist as *doppelgängers* of each other – bearing an uncanny resemblance at a seismic historical rift that continues to fracture.

There is a mordant resonance between the ways in which the centrifugal power of money disempowers and effectively destroys other oppositional viewpoints. Money and death embrace each other like grotesques in a medieval Christian mural of Hell. They say it «takes two to tango»...

Wrong-footed by the Machiavellian dynamics of greed and self-interest dressed as moral resolution, Shylock turns upon his accusers:

SHYLOCK ...If you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is

18 Ivi, 169

19 Ivi, 40.

his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew what should his suffrance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (3.1.70. 60-5)

From a post-Holocaust perspective, the inexpressible tragedy of the Nazi's "Final Solution" brutally and unutterably cross-examines and countermands Shylock's insistence that «it shall go hard» for his enemies drunk on anti-Semitic *schadenfreude* and laughing all of the way to the bank. "Work is freedom" Shylock will be cruelly and appallingly reminded as he enters the wrought iron gates of Auschwitz... What price justice then when commodified bodies nightmarishly transmute into a mass flesh-as-bond revenge by Luther's descendants in the premeditated annihilation of six million Jews?

Towards the end of *Bingo* the character of the Old Woman reflects upon the death of her husband killed in the crossfire between Combe's men and the political activists resisting his enclosure of the land:

OLD WOMAN. He'd been to see that dead woman, that's how it ended, He weren't greedy for money like some men [...] Well, you break a cup, you put it together. You can't keep asking who broke it. That's all as is²⁰.



FIGURE 3: 'Human voices wake us - and we drown' (Eliot)

In our broken world of virulent nationalism, refugees and asylum seekers and global economic collapse, we have to persist in asking «who

20 Ivi, 59.

broke it?». In doing so we must not only “critique capital” and its continuing impact upon the world and the environment but our own complex involvement and unwitting collusion with it.

Stoicism – that old sinking feeling – isn’t I suspect, enough. Both the geographical location of Venice and the geo-ideological site of late Capitalism in crisis are shifting tectonic plates of threatened stability, permanence and purpose. Only radical and arguably revolutionary strategies – both environmental, ecological and economic – can rescue and transform from this ontological vortex.

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Ամփոփում

ԵՒՈՒԱՐԴ ՊՈՆՏԻ ՊԵՆԿՈՅ ԹԱՏԵՐԱԽԱՂԸ (1973) ԵՒ
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Եղուարդ Պոնտ, քսաներորդ դարու յայտնի թատերագիր մը, իր Պինկոյ ("Bingo", 1973) գործին մէջ, Շէյքսպիրը հիմնովին կը վերամշակէ նոր մարքսիստական տեսանկիւնէ մը:

Այս թատերախաղը կը ներկայացնէ Շէյքսպիրը իր կեանքի վերջին տարիներուն, երբ կը խորհրդածէ բարոյագիտութեան, տնտեսագիտութեան եւ գեղագիտութեան հիմնական տրամախօսութեան շուրջ:

Պինկոն քսաներորդ դարու Անգլիոյ աշխատաւոր դասակարգի ժողովրդական բախտախաղ մըն էր: Պոնտի այս թատերախաղին մէջ, որու ենթավերնագիրն է «Դրամի եւ մահուան պատկերներ», հեղինակը հարցականներու առջեւ կը դնէ Շէյքսպիրը որպէս այս արդիական թատերախաղի գլխաւոր կերպար: Կերպարը ժէ. դարու նորածին առեւտրական դրամատիրութեան (կապիտալիզմի) օրերու՝ բարոյական եւ տնտեսական սահրանքներուն մէջ ինքզինք կը գտնէ:

Այս պատմական շրջանը կը զուգադիպի Վենետիկի վաճառականի ստեղծագործութեան եւ առաջին բեմադրութեան թուականին: