Academic Journal of Modern Philology

e-ISSN 2353-3218
ISSN 2299-7164
Vol. 4 (2015)
135–143

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Looking for Lear in Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep*

Abstract

First staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2010, Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* is an attempt to update the well-known story of *King Lear* to contemporary times. It focuses on Colm, an aging CEO who decides to divide his company evenly between two of his employees at the price of his only son's share, a decision that results in escalating a bloody conflict that tears apart the business empire. Despite featuring an all-star cast and having the full support of the RSC, *The Gods Weep* received mixed to wholly negative reviews and was criticized for being chaotic, lengthy and not faithful enough to the masterpiece of the Bard. The present article addresses the problems raised by the critics and attempts to demonstrate that their responses were largely misguided, as most of them failed to recognize the full complexity of what they were dealing with. Thus the paper first shows that Kelly's play is not merely a response to *King Lear* but, rather, a *bricolage* that recycles Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* as well as a number of other works. The article then suggests that *The Gods Weep* is not an adaptation but an appropriation, as it shifts the political thrust of the hypotext and bears a mark of Kelly's in-yer-face sensibility. Finally, the contribution argues that, given the range of sources that are being recycled, the play should not be viewed as an appropriation of a single text. Building on the concept of the "work" as formulated in Margaret Jane Kidnie's *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, I suggest that *The Gods Weep* should be viewed in the context of all texts which may be subsumed under what I call the "Lear type."

Keywords: *The Gods Weep*, Dennis Kelly, Shakespeare, adaptation, appropriation.

1. Introduction

Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* tells the story of Colm, an aging CEO of a multinational corporation who grows disillusioned with his life and decides to divide his company evenly between two of his employees, Richard and Catherine, at the price of his only son's share. His only terms are that the board members allow him to oversee an investment project in Belize which he aims to use for humanitarian purposes and that he retain the title of chairman. Predictably, Colm's successors wrest control of the company from their old leader and persuade his son, Jimmy, to double-cross him. As the power struggle between the board members escalates into a bloody conflict, Colm goes mad and seeks refuge with Barbara, the daughter of a man he determinedly drove to commit suicide. When the two finally resolve their differences and find a delicate balance, Jimmy betrays Richard and Catherine and ventures to find his father. Once he does, one of his soldiers inadvertently shoots Barbara and Colm goes mad again.

The play, deemed to be a response to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, was given its theatrical premiere by the Royal Shakespeare Company on March 12, 2010, with Jeremy Irons starring as Colm. The reviews it received were almost unanimously negative, as the play prompted acerbic responses such as: "Never mind the gods, this will make everyone cry" (Letts 2010), "Can Jeremy Irons save this modern take on Lear?" (Billen 2010: 46), or "The Gods Weep […] would remain intolerable even if reduced to the length of a haiku" (Spencer 2010). While the play was praised for its visceral imagery, the majority of critics complained about it being lengthy, chaotic, implausible, vulgar and lacking in narrative momentum as well as realism. They also displayed a tendency to, as Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan put it in their study of film adaptations, view the derivative work as "inevitably doomed to be inferior to its original" (2007: 2). Thus, Spencer (2010) claimed that *The Gods Weep* pales in comparison with Shakespeare's play as it lacks his "poetry, pity and depth of characterisation," while others argued that *King Lear* does not require any responses (Billen 2010: 46) and that adaptations are not what the British taxpayer expects from the RSC (Letts 2010).[1] More balanced assessments were offered by Michael Billington and Kate Bassett, who, unlike the other critics, felt that the least successful moments of the play were the ones that bore the most marked resemblance to *King Lear*.

The present paper will attempt to address the doubts raised by the critics and to suggest that they were mostly ill-founded. The article will, however, refrain from expressing a value judgment of the play and from defending it against those who claim that it is a poorly written text. Instead, it will concentrate on trying to answer the questions of how much of Shakespeare is truly left in Kelly's play and whether it was possible for *The Gods Weep* to live up to the expectations of the reviewers. The first part of the paper will compendiously identify some of the influences at play in the drama and will briefly analyze the effect that they exert on its meaning. The article will demonstrate that Kelly's text should be approached as a fairly complex *bricolage*[2] rather than as a simple-minded response to *King Lear*, and it will argue that the negative press reviews may be attributed to misrecognition of the hypotext. The article will then address the question of whether *The Gods Weep* should be approached as a production, an adaptation or as an appropriation, and of what exactly.

1 Obviously, there are many more reviews of the play, but the ones referred to in the present article are perfectly representative of the criticism leveled at *The Gods Weep*.

2 Sanders defines *bricolage* as "a collage or collection of different allusions, quotations, and references in the context of a new creative work" (2005: 161).

2. Influences

When asked about *The Gods Weep*, Kelly replied that he wrote the play because he was haunted by an idea for a character – a powerful man who has everything that one could possibly wish for who suddenly realizes that his achievements are meaningless and decides to divide his company between two of his followers (Kelly & Aberg 2010). While in the early drafts of the play the character that Kelly described was called Leon, a potential reference to Lear, but Kelly explains that the biggest inspiration for his play was Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (Kelly & Aberg 2010), a 1985 film that intermingles Shakespeare's *King Lear* with the Japanese stories of Mōri Motonari, a 16th-century daimyo. While far less radical than a number of other adaptations (Edward Bond's *Lear* being a case in point), *Ran* introduces several significant changes that are later echoed in Kelly's *The Gods Weep*. Perhaps most importantly, Kurosawa was dissatisfied with there being nothing to account for the behavior of Lear's daughters. In one of the interviews he argued that:

> Lear doesn't seem to have any reflection on his past. If he begins in a position of such great power, and then he goes mad because his daughters turn against him, there has to be a reason […] and the only reason must lie in his past behavior. He must have been a terrible tyrant to get to where he is at the beginning of the play. And his daughters must have learned from him. (Kurosawa, cited in Hoile 1987: 30)

Thus, as Hoile rightly notes, "Kurosawa's Lear is clearly not a man 'more sinn'd against / than sinning'" (1987: 31–32). As the film gradually reveals his past atrocities, it becomes increasingly obvious that its protagonist, Hidetora, is responsible for his own downfall. Kelly, too, leaves no doubt that Colm is fully to blame for what happens to him. His financial empire was built on a policy of aggressive expansion – he acquired other companies, ruthlessly fought his competitors and exploited his own personnel, firing the bottom 8% every year. In his own words, he also "fanned the flames" of disagreement between his board members so as to make them more productive (Kelly 2010: 29).

However, unlike Hidetora (or Lear for that matter), Colm does indeed recognize his past mistakes. In the opening scene he describes a dream[3] in which he was wandering on the beach and collecting shells until he saw a blackhead on his belly. He tried to squeeze it out and "it just kept coming, meters and meters of this, thick as your finger […] until there was a huge pile of it there on the floor. And it stank" (Kelly 2010: 28). This repelling image obviously points to Colm's moral degradation. The character recognizes this and, in an attempt to change his life, resigns, divides his company, and implores his successors not to follow in his footsteps: "I made you into beasts […] But do we make things that can only destroy, ravenous engines of wealth that can only move in one direction? […] are we monsters? No. No we are not" (Kelly 2010: 28–29). He rightly suspects that the company's division will be a trial not only for its employees, but also for the entire human race: "This is a test […] For all of us. For everything. For everything in the world" (Kelly 2010: 30). However, he fails to predict the outcome of his decision as, contrary to his expectations, people turn out to be monsters. When it becomes clear that depravity, greed and selfishness have triumphed, Colm offers an interesting take on reality: "I used to believe that the universe was cruel, that gods made things this way […] But now I see the truth […] they watch us and what we make and

3 The dream itself is another borrowing from *Ran*, where, directly before he divides his kingdom, Hidetora has a nightmare in which he is walking alone through a wilderness and is unable to find other people. Unlike Colm, however, Kurosawa's character attaches no significance to his oneiric vision.

what we do with our lives and to each other and they weep. They watch us and weep" (Kelly 2010: 122). His words, which are also used as the title of the play, are clearly a tribute to *Ran*, in which Tango, the Kent figure, utters similar lines upon witnessing the death of Hidetora and his loyal son. Interestingly, in both works they reverse the thrust of Gloucester's "As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods: / They kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare [1605–1606] 2007: 2052), thus attributing the blame for all the atrocities to mankind rather than to supernatural beings.[4]

While Colm appears to be aware of his mistakes from the very onset of the play, it is clear that he learns his lesson only towards its very end. In what seems to be a reversal of the scene from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Colm decides to disinherit his son, Jimmy, precisely because of his capability to love, which he views as a weakness. He also tells him that to successfully manage a company, he has to be able to break his own son's arms if necessary. Jimmy decides to prove his father wrong – in order to assert his strength he betrays him and breaks his arm. This act foregrounds another significant, if not necessarily apparent, similarity between *Ran* and *The Gods Weep*. Like Kurosawa,[5] Kelly decides to conflate several characters from *King Lear* in his play, thus making their portrayal all the more problematic. Until his betrayal, Jimmy could well be perceived as Cordelia's counterpart. However, the fact that he physically assaults his father and aligns himself with Richard and Catherine, who obviously represent Goneril and Regan, allows one to view him as the main antagonist of Shakespeare's play – Edmund. Such a reading could also be supported by the fact that Colm seems to view him as an illegitimate son, although he never says this directly. He does, however, believe that Jimmy has none of his qualities, says that he used to view him "as a kind of tumour" (Kelly 2010: 31), and notes that he had to convince himself to love him. Jimmy's portrayal proves to be even more problematic when one considers the fact that when he betrays Colm by taking control of Belize and destroying the life of his lover, Beth, he actually repeats his father's mistakes and proves to be his legitimate son. By the end of the play, when he has already had his revenge, he also realizes that he has no choice but to love Colm, and it is he who finds and rescues him. It may, therefore, be argued that the character is a conflation of Edgar as well as of Edmund and Cordelia.

Kurosawa's influence is also visible in Kelly's reworking of the storm that Lear rushes into after his argument with Goneril and Regan. As Hoile rightly observes, in *Ran* the tempest becomes a 5-minute-long battle sequence (1987: 32), a change that is signaled by a gust of wind that sweeps through a nearby plain and whips the grass right after the battle. Kelly opts for a similar solution in *The Gods Weep*, and the storm becomes a shelling, which is also one of the first signs of the ongoing war between Richard and Catherine. Not only is it an externalization of Colm's emotional breakdown, but it is also a testimony to how unpredictable and destructive the consequences of our actions can be. The shelling may also be viewed as a link with another text inspired by *King Lear* – Sarah Kane's infamous debut play titled *Blasted* (*cf*. Saunders 2002: 54). Like Kelly, Kane was fiercely criticized for not making it clear how the naturalistic expository part of her drama leads to the sudden escalation of a military conflict when a mortar shell

4 This is not to say that Shakespeare's *King Lear* suggests that it is the gods who are responsible for the tragic events. After he defeats Edmund in a duel, Edgar says that "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (Shakespeare [1605–1606] 2007: 2070). Edmund replies with: "Th'hast spoken right: 'tis true, / The wheel is acome full circle: I am here" (Shakespeare [1605–1606] 2007: 2070), which might suggest that the supernatural forces made it possible for Edgar to punish the archvillain. For a while it seems that justice has, indeed, triumphed. Shortly after, however, it is revealed that Cordelia was hanged, and Lear enters, carrying her body. He dies only a moment later, leaving the question of divine justice entirely unresolved and perhaps even more problematic than earlier.

5 For a detailed discussion of how this is done in *Ran*, see Hoile (1987).

blasts the hotel room in which it is set. In both cases, however, the outbreak of hostilities need not, and perhaps even should not, be plausible as its *raison d'être* is precisely to be unexpected. By catching the audience unaware it helps it realize that domestic violence (in the case of *Blasted*) and economic disruption (in the case of *The Gods Weep*) may easily get out of hand and lead to a much bigger problem with far more dire consequences.

The full complexity of Kelly's approach to his sources is, perhaps, best visible in his treatment of Barbara, the real Cordelia figure, and her relationship to Colm, as it seems to be drawn from Kurosawa, Kane, and Shakespeare alike. Like Lady Sué's in *Ran*, Barbara's life was destroyed by the Lear character who caused the death of her family. While in Hidetora's case the cruelty was a result of his military conquests, in Colm's it appears to be almost whimsical; when the character learns that Barbara's father, Ken, published an article that criticized one of his business decisions, he drives his company bankrupt, destroys his marriage and provides his son with medication until he overdoses, which results in Ken's suicide. Despite being one of the primary victims of Colm's cruelty, Barbara takes care of him and triggers a profound change in his behavior, which is symbolically marked by his apparent death and subsequent return to life. Their relationship is similar to that between Cate and Ian in *Blasted*, where the victimized woman takes care of her oppressor who also changes, dies and is reborn. Upon coming back from the dead, Colm echoes Shakespeare's play and asks: "Is this the afterlife?" (Kelly 2010: 161). He is then temporarily reunited with Barbara and is content to forget about everything that had happened.[6] This is clearly reminiscent of Lear's joyful acceptance of imprisonment alongside Cordelia after their military defeat: "Come, let's away to prison. / We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage" (Shakespeare [1605–1606] 2007: 2066). For a while, Colm and Barbara manage to live a life of pastoral idyll, which ends abruptly when the woman is shot by Jimmy's soldiers. Colm goes mad once more and the fate of his corporation is left in his son's hands, a fact that further highlights the similarities between Jimmy and Edgar.

While the influence of *King Lear* is primarily filtered through Kurosawa's *Ran*, and is restricted mostly to Kelly's approach to his characters and decision to preserve certain plot elements (*e.g.* Goneril and Regan's fight for Edmund, which is echoed by Catherine and Richard's struggle for Jimmy's loyalty), *The Gods Weep* nevertheless recycles some of the themes of Shakespeare's play, such as nature and madness. More interestingly, however, Kelly puts special emphasis on the astrological phenomena that Shakespeare's characters frequently refer to. Annabella Kitson (1996: 200) argues that "Shakespeare's plays are full of cosmic references […] [including] explicitly astrological ones which play a crucial part in the action." and rightly spots that Gloucester, for instance, refers to solar eclipses and takes them as a bad augury for the fate of the kingdom. *The Gods Weep* continues this theme and replaces the eclipses with a few mentions of astrological aspects and a meteor shower. Interestingly, Kelly decides to introduce the character of the Astrologer, who appears to be the driving force behind Richard's actions. The businessman consults each of his decisions with her and it is his inability to comprehend one of her prophecies that eventually leads to his downfall. She tells him that the only thing he has to fear is his greatest crime. Richard is

6 There is also another similarity to *Blasted*; shortly after Barbara learns the truth about Colm's identity, a storm starts and the protagonist is sitting in the rain, getting soaked because of his inability to build a proper shelter. Coupled with his earlier plans to dig a hole in which he planned to sit and wait for the rain to stop, it is an obvious, if faint, echo of one of the most memorable images of Kane's play – that of Ian dying and coming back to life when the rain starts to fall on his body. In both cases, the rain is also intricately tied to the notion of forgiveness.

convinced that the Astrologer means Colm, and asks his men to find and kill him, but before that happens he is killed by Beth, whose life was ruined as a result of the orders he gave to Jimmy. Interestingly, while the future of mankind does, indeed, seem to be written in the stars, it is still men who fail to make sense of it, thus bringing about their own destruction.

Finally, the imagery used in *The Gods Weep* echoes other works of culture, ranging from Hollywood cinema to canonical fine art. In one of the scenes, Barbara and Colm rejoice at the sight of snow, only to realize that it is actually ash falling from the sky, which might be seen as a reference to Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, which contains an iconic scene in which something resembling snow is cascading from the sky as children play happily in the park. It then cuts into concentration camps where the bodies of Jewish people are being incinerated, and it becomes clear that it is their ashes that are floating in the air. The inclusion of such an image in *The Gods Weep* greatly heightens the audience's awareness of the atrocities that are taking place as a result of the bloody conflict between the company's shareholders. A similar effect is achieved by the description of brutality of one of the characters who decides to hack the bodies of the slain enemies to pieces and to display them on a tree. This may be approached as a faint echo of Francisco Goya's *A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!*, which is one of the prints from his *The Disasters of War* series.[7] The play also includes less provocative images taken from other sources, but appears to use them subversively. This is best visible in a dream that Richard narrates towards the middle of the play – he dreamed of a number of woodland critters who came through his windows to watch him sleep. Kelly clearly recycles one of the most recognizable elements of Disney's classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and reverses its thrust for comic effect. He does so by replacing Snow White, a symbol of beauty and innocence, with Richard – arguably the most repulsive character in the play – and by adding earthworms and ants to the list of animals that visit him, thus making it excessively long and ridiculously inclusive.

This brief overview of Kelly's sources carries significant implications for the discussion on the critical response that the play received, as it points to the fact that the vast majority of the reviewers failed to recognize and fully grasp what they were dealing with. Irrespective of whether it was the RSC's production or the critics themselves that were to blame for this, the fact remains that the play was approached primarily as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This mistake is not as innocent as it may initially seem. Theorists and critics who deal with the issue of adaptations unanimously agree that the reception of such works is largely based on an interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between repetition and change (Hutcheon 2006: 8; Sanders 2005: 25; Helman 1998: 15–16). We perceive adaptations as new texts, but as ones that are nevertheless always connected to a particular hypotext – and it is this unusual tension between them that allows us to experience pleasure (Hutcheon 2006: 114; Sanders 2005: 14). It may, therefore, be argued that the reviewers who viewed *The Gods Weep* solely as a response to Shakespeare's *King Lear* were bound to dislike the play because they were seeing it through a distorted lens. Their misrecognition of the source text effectively shifted the balance between repetition and innovation – decisively in favor of the latter – thus depriving the critics of what Hutcheon calls "the comfort of ritual and recognition" (2006: 173), and allowing them to indulge in misguided accusations of butchery and infidelity which precluded them from appreciating *The Gods Weep* as a play in its own right.

7 It is also probable that Kelly was inspired by *The Great Deeds Against the Dead* (1994), by Jake and Dinos Chapman, a sculpture which reworked Goya's etching.

3. Implications

Despite the fact that Kelly distills an eclectic range of sources into *The Gods Weep*, it would be a significant mistake to view him simply as a derivative writer. While the play does, indeed, preserve the basic plot structure of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and it recycles a number of elements from *Ran* and *Blasted*, it is, first and foremost, an expression of Kelly's growing interest in capitalism and the importance of money in contemporary society. Just like his 2006 play, *Love and Money*, it probes into our inability to take the human factor into account when considering financial matters and exposes our readiness to exploit other people. Written shortly after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 which resulted in the ongoing European sovereign debt crisis, the play is primarily a warning against our complacency toward Western economic policies. Clearly, Kelly's driving impulse was not to retell or update the story of Lear and his daughters but to weave a cautionary tale about the dangers of capitalism. He uses his sources to offer analogues and treats them as merely a means of communicating the message rather than as the message itself. Thus his play is perhaps best described as an appropriation, a product of an act that, in Hutcheon's words, involves "taking possession of another's story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one's own sensibility, interests, and talents" (2006: 18). Kelly's play also fits into Sanders' definition of appropriation, as she claims that in this type of work the relation between the hypotext and the hypertext is often less explicit than in adaptations proper, and notes that they often involve "a political or ethical commitment [that] shapes a writer's […] decision to re-interpret a source text" (Sanders 2005: 2). In the case of *The Gods Weep*, the need to recycle the story of both *King Lear* and *Ran* is driven by Kelly's intention to criticize Western capitalism. Apart from shifting the political thrust of the story and transposing it to a contemporary setting, the playwright also leaves a visible mark of his in-yer-face sensibility in the play.

This, however, still does not answer the question of what it is exactly that Kelly's *bricolage* appropriates – is it *Ran*, *King Lear*, or perhaps still another text such as Edward Bond's *Lear*? The answer is somewhat paradoxical, as one may claim that it appropriates all of them and neither one of them at the same time. Clearly, *The Gods Weep* bears enough similarities with Shakespeare's drama for the reviewers to approach it primarily as a response to the Bard's play. To view it as an appropriation of a single text, however, would be extremely reductive. This is so since to a reader/viewer who has a developed genre and media literacy – to use one of Hutcheon's terms – a given text may simultaneously evoke a large number of other adaptations or appropriations. It would, therefore, be wise to adopt the perspective associated with what Sanders calls "open structuralism," *i.e.* "readings which are invested not in proving a text's closure to alternatives, but in celebrating its ongoing interaction with other texts and artistic productions" (2005: 18).

Indeed, as Margaret Jane Kidnie observes in her seminal book *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, it is extremely difficult to speak of original versions and, consequently, of closure to alternatives in the case of drama. This is largely so since dramatic texts are usually meant to be performed on the theatrical stage. Inevitably, the dramatist is not the only person involved in the production of a given play, as preparing a performance largely relies on the work of stage designers, actors, choreographers, directors, lighting directors and fight directors. A single decision on the part of any of these people may easily subvert the meaning of the drama and render it entirely inauthentic in the eyes of the critics. Voice inflection, the physical appearance of the actors and the use of light may all redirect the political or philosophical thrust of an otherwise faithful production of a given play. All this is even more problematic when it comes to Shakespeare. Not only is he long dead and has no control over the performances, but

his plays also exist in several versions that differ from one another – a fact that further complicates the question of their authenticity.

With all this in mind, Kidnie asserts that a play "is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic *process* that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (2009: 2). In order to advance her argument, she uses Wilsmore's category of the "work," which he describes as "a normative structure embedded in the practices of a shared culture where values enter into the determination of the identity of the work of art"; she then argues that his concept is flawed in that it locates the work's essence in the authorial intention (Kidnie 2009: 29). In an attempt to correct this, she suggests that the criteria of the work are located "not prior to the work's instances of production […] but subsequent to production, in users' perceptions of sameness and difference among the many variants found in distinct production instances" (Kidnie 2009: 29). It is the spectator who looks for patterns and identifies a play as an instance of a given work (Kidnie 2009: 29).[8] A work is, therefore, an abstract construct, a type that may be used to group "under a generic title non-identical examples of text and performance that are somehow recognized as 'the same'" (Kidnie 2009: 7).

As long as there is some agreement between the spectators, Kurosawa's *Ran*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Bond's *Lear*, and any future variations on the story may be approached as different instances (tokens) of the same work (type). The concept of the work, then, is extremely useful when trying to answer the question of what Kelly is truly appropriating; it allows one to go beyond the reductive perspective adopted by the reviewers of the play who tried to posit that *The Gods Weep* is a response to a single text. Inevitably, their opinions veered in the direction of fidelity criticism as they accused the play of being too innovative and, in consequence, inferior to Shakespeare's text. Given the complexity of the play, however, it would be far more productive to place it in the context of all the texts/productions which are believed to be tokens of the "Lear type." Not only would such a perspective do away with fidelity criticism and survival discourse, but it would also establish a creative tension with other plays, films and works of art, thus revealing a complex web of relations not only with prior texts, but also with the ones that are yet to be written. In other words, it would liberate criticism from its obsession with synchronic fixity of a given text and allow one to fully appreciate the diachronic fluidity of the work.

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8 This is reminiscent of the ideas formulated in Stanley Fish's seminal article titled "How to Recognize a Poem when You See One," in which he argues that poems have no qualities that make them poems and that it is actually the act of interpretation on the part of the reader that allows for the emergence of features peculiar to verse ([1980] 2004: 1023–1030).

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