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Performing the Abject:

Volatile moments of identity in Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*.

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Abstract

The plays of British dramatist Sarah Kane (1971-1999) confront the problem of subject identity in a postmodern fragmented world in a radical and unsettling way. Within a reality that widely negates the traditional ways of experiencing identity (as well as its representation) in relationship, narration, or in notions such as character and continuity, her dramatis personae are endangered by a dispersal of self. Seemingly recurring to a Cartesian idea of a strict dichotomy between body and mind Kane shows her characters as driven by a strong desire to overcome the same. This aim, however, proves to be obtainable only in rare moments of suffering and in drastic 're-enactments' at the threshold between life and death.

Applying Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as well as Victor Turner's concept of liminality in ritual performance, the paper sets out to explore Kane's concept of identity, especially focusing on her second play, *Phaedra's Love*. Analysing the protagonist Hippolytus' radical and repulsive crave for authenticity within a society of spectacle it discusses the importance of the abject as a realm of self-encounter with the experience of disgust and nausea as means of self-perception.

Furthermore, the paper argues that although in the corrupt society depicted in Kane's play the idea of ritual has become distorted and dysfunctional, in voluntarily adopting the role of a perpetrator her protagonist (becoming the victim in a cruel performance) experiences identity, albeit in the moment of utmost torture and, ultimately, death. On a larger plane, Kane's plays open up possibilities to theatrically overcome the fragmentation of the subject in the acceptance of its abject condition as "mortal and speaking" and for audiences to perceive identity through the means of performance on stage.

Introduction

That the five plays Sarah Kane wrote before her untimely death in 1999 were at first received as scandalous and disgusting due to their excessive display of – particularly sexual – violence on stage before they became highly estimated pieces of the modern theatre repertoire on the European continent and beyond, has by now become a well-known fact. With their dramatis personae subject to rape, mutilation, and torture, the plays confront audiences with the realms of our existence that Julia Kristeva has termed the "abject": the deadly horrors from which we permanently try to separate (in order to function) – a goal, however, that we can never fully achieve, as these frightening powers are part of our existence – individual or collective.

With a significant development in her work – away from the conventional dramatic notions of constant character, conflict and continuity that we can still find in her first plays, towards texts that completely do away with clearly defined dialogue and narration – Kane seems to epitomize the progressive course of a crisis of the subject in our societies at large. A crisis that Karoline Gritzner attributes to a postmodernity that seems to leave "the human subject or self dissolved or in pieces, an empty signifier for a series of roles or socially constructed positions" (2008, 328).

Clare Wallace calls it the crisis "of the destabilised self in a world of spectacle and simulacra" (2006, 194), and she finds in Kane's plays an "alienated and negated vision of the self." (196). Yet, Kane insists on the idea of a person's "unity" (see Tabert 1998, 10), of "sanity and humanity" (Saunders 2002, 81). She maintains that there are moments in her plays, in which this can be perceived, in which "everything suddenly connects."

It has variously been suggested that Kane's plays offer a space to negotiate identity "differently - outside boundaries of current thinking in which identity may already be prescribed by, or inscribed on, the body" (Waddington 2011, 145-146), that the postmodern dilemma of the fragmented self is presented "in order to be theatrically overcome" (144), and that the notion of ritual providing a theatrical reality might offer a key to understanding her plays (Brusberg-Kiermeier 2011, 85).

However, how all these components play together in a process of constructing identity, resulting in moments – though short and fugitive – of "unity", has not yet been examined. Focusing on Kane's second play, *Phaedra's Love*, this paper sets out to do so. It proposes that Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection can shed light on the play's complex processes of exclusion and separation on the edge of the abject, processes that take place in fragmented rituals and role-play and that comprise the fatal perils of death and destruction as well as the potential to make identity perceptible in liminal moments.

Kane's Notion of Identity – in the Shade of Cartesian Dualism?

When Kane claims: "The only way back to any kind of sanity is to connect physically with who you are, emotionally and spiritually and mentally" (Saunders 2002, 81), this suggests the experience of a fundamental split between an essential 'person' and the body¹ – a recurrent figure in Kane's plays and in her comments on her work, as Julie Waddington (2011) has shown. In *Cleansed* the female protagonist Grace is suffering from a sensation of discrepancy between her feelings and her looks. Asked what she would like to change in her life, she answers:

My body. So it looked like it feels.

Graham outside as Graham inside. (Kane 2001, 126)

She tries to overcome this incongruity in the theatrical act of having male genitals stitched on – a bizarre performance of a grotesque body transformation. In *Crave* Kane addresses the problem of identity on the formal level by abandoning the concept of fixed characters and their embodiment with sentences and topics shared and repeated by various speakers; and in *4.48 Psychosis*, eventually, the dualism of persona and body is explicitly addressed, when the speaking voice asks: “Do you think it’s possible for a person to be born in the wrong body?” (Kane 2001, 215).

All this suggests that Kane’s idea of subject identity might be perceived within a humanist concept of self in the tradition of Descartes (see Waddington 2011, 139ff.), in which the mind is conceived as completely separate from the body and capable of existing independently without the latter.² Waddington, however, shows, that although Kane clearly sees the problem in the supposed split, she does not come up with simple solutions, as the conflict of identity emerging from this is not easily solved or overcome in any of her plays – not even in *Cleansed* as within her new body (which she perceives as “perfect” and harmonizing inside and outside) Grace cannot survive. Rats are already gnawing on it and it will deteriorate and perish.

How desperate and futile any effort to overcome the fundamental schism eventually turns out, Kane expresses at the very end of *4.48 Psychosis*: “It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind” (2001, 245). Waddington concludes that Kane does not reinstate “an essential human” (2011, 148). The divide Kane proposes is a condition of our very existence as it is to be found within the subject itself: the fugitive ‘self’ is constituted in the speaking subject’s discourse. This brings to mind Julia Kristeva’s dynamic concept of the ‘self’ as a “subject-in-process/on trial”.³ She proposes identity to be conceived as “a productive but always only provisional identity [...] whose constant companions are alterity, negation, and difference” (Oliver 1993, 14), and which is shaped within the persistent dialectic of the pre-verbal and the always already existing Symbolic.

Performance at the Threshold of the Subject

In all three plays in which Kane shows characters on stage, some of them experience moments of “sanity and humanity” (Saunders 2002, 81), but this experience coincides with deterioration, utmost pain and, ultimately, death. Be it Grace in *Cleansed*, as mentioned above, be it with Ian in *Blasted*, with the soldier in the same play or Hippolytus in *Phaedra’s Love* for whom Kane herself underlines the simultaneous experience of life and death (see Saunders 2002, 81).

According to Kristeva’s “Essay on Abjection”, *Powers of Horror* (1982), it is exactly this proximity of death and decay that spurs life in the strong spontaneous motion of separation which she calls abjection: When we are confronted with the ultimate border between life and death – in sight of a dead body for example, facing blood and pus or smelling waste and decay – it is our strong bodily reaction upon this encounter which at the same time pushes us towards life:

[...] as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (Kristeva 1982, 3).

It is only in extreme exposure, in approaching and confronting the subject, that there is a notion of identity in Kane’s plays. As Kristeva puts it:

On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, subject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (ibid., 2).

The fugitive moments in which Kane’s characters experience identity are repeatedly connected with role-play and performance in which the division of mind and body might be overcome temporarily: For the soldier in *Blasted* who has witnessed and gone through the most horrible atrocities and who now perpetrates the same on others, meaning and language have collapsed as a way of dealing with traumatic experiences. Since narrative as a means of quieting down suffering, horror, and disgust (cf. Kristeva 1982, 145) does not work any more in sight of monstrosities beyond imagination, the only chance for the soldier to conceive what has happened to his girlfriend – and thereby to perceive himself – is a physical “re-enactment” (Saunders 2002, 47) of the rape she has undergone with a gun on the head. Kane emphasises: “the only way he can ever learn what his girlfriend had to go through is when he’s pulling the trigger ... the next moment is the moment of his death” (ibid.).

Approaches towards identity in *Phaedra’s Love* Hippolytus’ Quest for Authenticity

The central figure in *Phaedra’s Love* is the royal prince Hippolytus. At the outset of the play we witness him as the only person on stage, hanging around in an appalling mess of consumer goods (ranging from expensive high tech games to junk food leftovers and used underwear), alternately eating and masturbating in front of a TV screen displaying a violent Hollywood movie. Deadly bored and blunted, he impassively watches the increasingly violent scenes on the screen as if searching in vain for a stimulus strong enough to reach him. Throughout the play he is shown as a cynic sexmaniac, discarding partners just as the socks he uses to masturbate in. The doctor diagnoses him as “depressed” (Kane 2001, 65) or rather “just very unpleasant.” (68). His stepmother Phaedra, passionately in love with him, Hippolytus humiliates verbally (in offensive sexual allegations) and physically: he performs oral sex with her, forcing her not to evade his ejaculation and dismissing her rudely afterwards. At the end of the play Hippolytus

again is alone on stage: victim of a horrid public slaughter, now surrounded by dead bodies, vultures above him. Perceiving the birds while dying he smiles and says:

If there could have been more moments
like this. (Kane 2001, 103).

Ultimately his quest has found its end: a single unique moment of (self-) perception that he is able to acknowledge as such.

Perceiving oneself in Disgust

Food loathing, the revulsion in the face of filth, waste or dung, the gagging sensation caused by the skin on the milk – for Kristeva all these are examples for abjection as a life securing process: “The spasms and vomiting that protect me.” (1982, 2) Abjection as experienced by the infant in the spontaneous reactions of retching and vomiting, Kristeva sees as a precondition for individuation: the first act of revolt and separation from mother and father. However, the infant has not yet reached a state of separately being; therefore any movement of separation endangers its very existence as it means the expulsion of oneself. Therefore separation can never be complete. ”But since the food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, [...], I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (ibid., 3). This notion of disgust and expulsion in the dialectic of simultaneously securing and endangering life is crucial for Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection (as a permanent motion) and its importance for the question of subject identity.

It is the same moment of revulsion that we find in Hippolytus: He despises the reverence of the people, whom he all hates in equal measure (see Kane 2001, 75 and 77), and he acts in provokingly disgusting manner. The life in which he was born he calls “this shit” (77). His contemptuous attitude towards people, objects and towards himself is an authentic and direct manifestation of his condition – albeit a condition of waste and sheer contingency. Disgust is his only means of self-perception: “I’m fat. I’m disgusting. I’m miserable” (78). It is in loathing and expulsion, i.e. in abjection, that Hippolytus senses his utter existence and its absurdity, but he cannot yet perceive himself as a speaking subject, a “subject in process/on trial”.

The critical turn takes place in the middle of the play: After the humiliating encounter with Hippolytus, Phaedra commits suicide leaving a note that accuses her stepson to have raped her. Upon receiving this news Hippolytus takes action for the very first time of his life: He calls the incrimination a “chance” (90) and decides to turn himself in although he has not committed the crime he is accused of. In a deliberate act he voluntarily adopts a role – the role of a perpetrator. He feels a kind of joy expressing his new self-conception: “Me. A rapist. Things are looking up.” (87), he feels “Life at last” (90).

Ritual in *Phaedra’s Love* - Order and Chaos –

As Kristeva suggests that subject identity has to be negotiated in the dialectic relationship of the symbolic order and the semiotic (maternal) authority which holds sway in the preverbal state, the question of identity is connected with the issue of order and chaos on an individual and collective plane. This is also true for *Phaedra’s Love*. In her version of the Phaedra myth Kane shows – similar to Seneca – the dissolution of structure and values in a corrupt society. She displays this effectively in a parallel construction of contemporary British royalty and antique drama (see Brusberg-Kiermeier 2001, 170).

Not only does the notion of myth gain increasing importance towards the end of *Phaedra’s Love* (see Pankratz 2011, 152), but also ritual and theatrical elements become prominent. This commences in scene seven with a tableau supposedly set for the public: the King in front of a funeral pyre with monumental gesture mourning for his late wife tearing his clothes, skin and hair up to exhaustion. The following final scene is explicitly set in the open public space outside the court. It shows actions that are deliberately staged, yet go out of control and end in a collective excess of violence. King Theseus, in disguise, tries to agitate the people who have gathered in order to follow Hippolytus’ court trial and see him condemned. He, however, breaks free from the guards and hurls himself into the crowd who then maltreat and eventually violently kill him in a public slaughter or human sacrifice. The scene unites various fragmented elements of ritual practice which Kane recombines; profaning and at times inverting them (see Brusberg-Kiermeier 2011, 80).

Defining ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (Turner 1973, 1100), Victor Turner points out that “it is a mobilization of energies as well as messages.” (ibid., 1102). Correspondingly Julia Kristeva emphasises the aspect of re-enactment in rituals over their symbolizing function and their potential to facilitate “an abreaction of the pre-sign impact, the semiotic impact of language.” (1982, 73).

Playing with various ritual elements in *Phaedra’s Love*

We find echoes of biblical diction – e.g. in the following dialogue:

WOMAN 1	He must die.
MAN 2	Has to die.
MAN 1	For our sake. (Kane 2001, 99) ⁴

And there are resemblances with religious motives: the torturing and spitting on Hippolytus remind one of the passion of Christ, and Theseus kissing him before throwing him into the mob who shout “kill him” is reminiscent of the act of treason by Judas Iscariot and at the same time of Pilate turning Jesus over to the crowd.

A different frame of reference is quoted when Hippolytus’ genitals are cut off and thrown on the barbecue. This alludes to an archaic sacrifice as prescribed e.g. in the book of Leviticus, where the intestines of the sacrificial animal are burnt in order that the incense raise to God and thus in a vertical movement renew the connection of the worshipping people to a higher, pre-existing order.⁵

Yet it is unsettling – for spectators and participants alike – that in Kane’s scenario the secure borders of (ritual) performance are missing or blown up by the overwhelming energies that are set free.

Rites of Exclusion – Roleplay – Carnival

“As Kristeva has argued throughout her writings, identity is formed on the basis of exclusion. [...] Like psychic identity, group identity forms itself by excluding the other”, Kelly Oliver (1993, 150) sums up one of Kristeva’s fundamental observations. The same is also valid for *Phaedra’s Love*: The crowd, who initially gathered to follow the court trial, are agitated about Hippolytus’ supposed incest (WOMAN 1: “Raped his own mother” (Kane 2001, 98)) – a breach of a fundamental taboo – and reacts with rigorous exclusion. The process of accusation, verdict and punishment is set apart and is substituted by orgiastic bloodshed: Hippolytus is kicked, mocked and stoned by the crowd. His body cut open by his own father, he is being publicly castrated and painfully killed. – Sensually experiencing the performance of exclusion seems more important than killing a culprit.⁶

Thus Kane’s scenario of human sacrifice and violent exclusion resembles patterns of antique scapegoat rituals or similar rites of purgation in which a society violently excludes a member in order to strengthen order and collective identity. Kristeva points out to the typical ambiguity of the antique *pharmakós* (see 1982, 84ff): the coincidence of ideal and transgression in a single character. Kristeva exemplifies this in the figure of Oedipus. However, the same is also true for Kane’s Hippolytus. In a certain way he meets an ideal: denying any compromises, euphemisms and courtesies, he pursues a radical concept of honesty that goes beyond traditional understanding. He owns a “purity of self-hatred”, as Kane has put it.⁷ At the same time, the crowd takes him for guilty of incest – a fundamental transgression. Not denying this – although he has not committed the same in a literal sense – he positions himself in an unsolvable situation in which he cannot escape guilt. Either he is culpable as an incestuous rapist or as a liar betraying his own ideal of absolute honesty. Hippolytus deliberately adopts a tragic role.

With ridiculing, reckless laughter, disguise and travesty and with theatrically exaggerated butchering, the last scene of *Phaedra’s Love* also shows elements of carnival,⁸ with the prince of carnival obtaining a similar role as the scapegoat or *pharmakós* in symbolizing the inversion and temporary suspension of values and conventions, that are reinstalled and strengthened by the following ritual incineration. (see Kristeva 1982, 84). The scene bears the ambiguity of violence and laughter with the onlookers who have come to the site with their family and barbecue watching and cheering (Kane 2001, 101) when Theseus – not knowingly – rapes and kills his own (step-)daughter: “Much laughter” (101).

Derision as an act of exclusion resembles vomiting out of disgust, Menninghaus states; and he maintains that laughter thus can mean a successful abreaction of tensions in the confrontation with the abject without risking the psychotic disintegration of the self. (2002, 542). Acts of exclusion function as coping strategies and can reassure individuals as well as groups. In the archaic forms of scapegoat- and substitution rites this aspect was underpinned by the idea to manipulate fate according to one’s own interests and to render an uncertain future predictable and manageable (see Huber 2005, 340). In Kane’s scenario, however, the intended manipulation towards a stabilisation of monarchic hierarchy fails; the riotous energies surmount Theseus’ capacity to control them. The scene ends with the extinction of the royal family (the king provokes the murder of his son, kills his stepdaughter and – after realizing that – eventually himself) and in complete destabilisation of the existing order.

The weakness of order and prohibition

As Kristeva describes the „subject-in process“ as developing in the dialectic of a pre-existing – symbolic – order and maternal – semiotic – authority, Victor Turner proclaims a dynamic balance of firm social structure and the experience of „communitas“, which can be experienced in releasing moments within rites of passage (1969, 129), as a prerequisite for any functioning society. This balance between fixed structure and free energies, which is crucial for the experience of individual as collective identity respectively, is suspended in the society Kane has displayed in *Phaedra’s Love*. The order is so frail that in the fragments of corrupted rituals a sudden sense of “communitas” takes over ecstatically.

Moments of liminality

At the end of the play we encounter a suspension of time, a blurring of the borders between life and death: A moment “in-between”, which offers an extraordinary experience to Hippolytus. Kristeva associates being “in-between” with the process of abjection. Turner has observed and explained such moments with his concept of liminality in rites of passage, according to which liminal beings are “neither here nor there”: they roam in a nowhere between the fixed positions provided by laws, conventions and ceremonies.

We are presented, in such rites, with a “moment in and out of time,” and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. (Turner 1969, 96).

With his confession of guilt – even if he has not even committed the crime – Hippolytus accepts the order of the law, however corrupt it has proved. Submitting himself to this order he reinstalls and revalidates the same for himself and for the moment being. It is an intentional decision to take over a part in a game with its obviously arbitrary rules. At the same time it means a separation from corruption and from the impassive dullness Hippolytus has been experiencing throughout his life. Thus he frees himself as an individual, but at the same time he submits himself to death. As Kristeva states: “I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (1982, 3).

According to Kristeva, abjection can only function as a life-assuring process if its ‘Other’ exists: the symbolic order as a social order, the order of signs and language, culture:

[...] an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. (ibid., 10)

Dying, Hippolytus perceives vultures circling above him in the sky and he smiles. Kane understands this as a flash of identity: “in his moment of death everything suddenly connects. He has one moment of complete sanity and unity. But in order to get there he has to die” (Saunders 2002, 81). Kane’s analysis is bleak: in the middle of corruption, in a dysfunctional society identity cannot be constant. However, in Kane’s first three plays with their coincidences of unity and death, subject identity can be experienced in acknowledging our abject condition as speaking beings. It is significant that at the very end of the play Hippolytus has the last word after having been silent during almost the whole scene:

If there could have been more moments
like this. (Kane 2001, 103)

Kristeva has a way to cope with the subject’s paradox situation of futility and freedom that is also true for us as spectators of Kane’s experiential theatre that does not know any “barrier between life and drama” as Edward Bond has stated (2011, 218). It is the very awareness of our condition that experiencing Kane’s plays can offer us and it is precisely this awareness that empowers us to live as autonomous individuals:

The border between abjection and the sacred, between desire and knowledge, between death and society, can be faced squarely, uttered without sham innocence or modest self-effacement, provided one sees in it man’s particularity as *mortal and speaking*. ‘There is an abject’ is henceforth stated as, ‘I am abject, that is, mortal and speaking’. (Kristeva 1982, 88).

Biographical note

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¹ Cf. Kane in Tabert 1998, 10: „die Spaltung von Bewußtsein und Körper“.

² See Descartes' sixth meditation (Descartes 1960, 70).

³ This concept is developed in Kristeva's seminal work *Revolution in poetic language*, first published in French, 1974.

⁴ Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁵ Cf. Leviticus 1:9 and 1:13.

⁶ Cf. also Georges Bataille, who emphasises the oscillating play of repulsion and attraction in the moment of exclusion. For Bataille exclusion signifies a fundamental motion in human existence which sets free powerful energies. (See Menninghaus 2002, 493).

⁷ Cf. Kane in Langridge and Stephenson 1997, 132: "Instead of pursuing what is traditionally seen as pure, my Hippolytus pursues honesty, both physically and morally - even when that means he has to destroy himself and everyone else. The purity of this self-hatred makes him much more attractive as a character than the virginal original."

⁸ Cf. Bachtin, 1987, 239.