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Part I
Contemporary Adaptations of Shakespeare

"You'll Get Old Sitting There": Contempt for Aged Males in Three "Shakespearean" Works by Edward Bond

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"Time goes. I'm surprised how old I've got."
Edward Bond, Bingo

Introduction: Bond's "Shakespearean" trilogy about aged men

It is argued that three plays by Edward Bond, born in 1934, should be regarded as a loose trilogy—and that the plays are united because they use the legacy of Shakespeare to provoke uncomfortable reflections on aging and ageism. Two Bond plays are renowned for addressing the vexed legacy of Shakespeare head-on. *Lear* (1971) is an uncompromising appropriation of *King Lear* in which Bond "corrects" Shakespeare's too-casual treatment of the under-represented effects of the mad king's actions on the poor of the mismanaged kingdom of Britain; *Bingo* (1973) is a bitter depiction of a dying Shakespeare who realizes that his art has been worthless because it has done nothing to frustrate murderous inequalities in post-Tudor England. It is less well-known that *The Worlds* (1979) is also a Shakespearean adaptation—the story of an arrogant company director, Trench, who loses his position and degenerates into a rabid, destructive, tramp-like, terrorist-supporting misanthrope, is an adaptation of *Timon of Athens*. *Bingo* is a quasi-biographical conceit; the other two plays are radical appropriations.

Julie Sanders's definition of appropriation as opposed to mere adaptation is important here: "Appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26). [1] In other words, appropriations, such as those by Bond, are new works in their own right—they are not adaptations of Shakespeare but radical new plays contrived to perpetuate Bond's theatrical, political, and moral vision. Many critics have written about Bond's engagement with Shakespeare—especially *Lear* and *Bingo*—but none have afforded *The Worlds* the same attention as the previous two. (*The Sea*, Bond's play from 1973, refers clearly to elements of *The Tempest.* However, that play cannot be said to be an overt appropriation of a Shakespeare work in the way that *Lear* and *The Worlds* both are.)

Crucially, critics have, understandably, concentrated on the quasi-Brechtian staging techniques in Bond's plays as well as the blistering, uncompromisingly leftist critiques of historical and contemporary economic and social inequalities, but none have addressed the arguably more humanistic issue of ageism. This is important because the lead characters in the three plays are all victims of ferocious ageism: despite his callousness, Bond's Lear is a man more sinned against than sinning because his aged impotence and alleged senescence are met with even more overt contempt than in Shakespeare's original; Shakespeare, in *Bingo*, is openly mocked for willful inactivity by his supposed friend, Ben Jonson, and by his shrewish daughter, Judith; and Trench, in *The Worlds*, is revered when fit to run his

1 Sara Munson Deats also usefully clarifies the differences between "adaptation" and "appropriation" in *The Faust Legend: From Marlowe and Goethe to Contemporary Drama and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 7-8. For some practical assistance in the production of this essay, we thank Anoush Simon.

company but ruthlessly marginalized and discarded when he is forcibly retired from his own executive board. The descent into psychological torment that all three lead characters endure is directly related to ageism. Aging is almost entirely presented as a cause for scorn and derision in these plays. Bond generally sidesteps any sense of aging well: in his plays, good aging cannot be bought. The three leading characters addressed in this essay do improve as people—but only within themselves and in a manner unnoticed and/or unappreciated by their contemporaries.

The plays are set variously in ancient Britain, in Jacobean England and in late-1970s Britain: it is widely acknowledged that Bond rightly or wrongly sees consistent economic discrimination across these vastly different eras—it should, we argue, also be apparent that Bond sees bigotry towards the aged as being another social malady that is consistent across centuries and even millennia. Shakespeare's plays are full of reflection on aging and on inter-generational conflict: characters in Shakespeare plays often "retire": King Lear relinquishes his kingship, Lady Macbeth skulks off and gives up on public life, and Prospero breaks his staff. Across his three plays, Bond appropriates Shakespearean meditations on aging and juxtaposes them with his own observations about society's disregard for those who are no longer economically productive.

Lear: From kingship to shovel—the decline of aged Lear

Lear, Bond's quasi-Brechtian, epic play of 1971, is framed by two contrasting events involving a wall. Lear is a despotic king, a man obsessed with enemies within and without. He is pursuing an unending building process: to build a giant wall around his kingdom. It is a monomaniacal pursuit, a depraved obsession that does nothing to add to the kingdom's security

but does much to convey to us the closed nature of Lear's heart and mind. Building the wall uses up vast resources—Simon Trussler almost anthropomorphizes the wall when he describes its "insatiable demands for manpower" (22). The hopeless, Sisyphean job to build the complete wall recalls various, ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to build permanent walls in British history—Hadrian's Wall, Offa's Dyke, and various Saxon wall remains in East Anglia are obvious models—and Leslie Smith compares Lear's wall more specifically to certain East Anglian earthworks (73). Nonetheless, from a twenty-first-century perspective it is hard to look at Lear's meritless wall and not think about the "peace walls" that still scar Belfast, and it is especially hard to not think about Donald Trump's perpetually hyped but never realized border wall with Mexico.

Lear's role in the wall-building is determined, hands-on. And unforgiving. In the first scene, he personally shoots dead a supposed slacker—it is an unjust and counterproductive act that leads to the revelation that his daughters are plotting against him. Their shared contempt for the military uselessness of the wall and its ruinous impact upon the State's finances motivates them to do deals with the supposed enemies outside the wall. The fact that they in turn will become at least as murderous and totalitarian as their father is beside the point. The point is that building the wall has been a lifelong mania for Lear. "I started this wall when I was young," he asserts (3). The obvious implication is that he is not young now. He has aged with the wall—and it will outlast him: "My people will live behind this wall when I'm dead," he predicts, a little vaingloriously (3). So, the wall is at once a symbol of Lear's misguided life and a vanity project that will, he thinks, bring glory to him even in death. It is a wall contrived to defy aging—the wall can thwart aging and death and render him

immortal. As Debra A. Castillo paraphrases Lear's glib thinking, the wall should facilitate "the continuance of polite society, of civilization, of a polished and perfect state that would be peaceful even if governed by fools" (80). Lear's two daughters, Bodice and Fontanelle, effectively stage a coup as soon as Lear shoots the supposed slacker.

Lear's fall is immediate; his intellectual decline is even more melodramatic and speedy than it is in Shakespeare's version of the story. He degenerates quickly into a sort of hobo character, an itinerant nobody who is haunted by regret and failure. His self-consciousness about aging is one of the few constants in his now-fractured existence. He is enduring a sort of living death. He claims that "I'm old and too weak to climb out of this grave again" (Bond, *Lear* 17). It is an almost Gothic image—a bleak meditation on a life ruined by familial treachery and defined by a realization that his rule was one of misguided authoritarianism that felt right to him when he was the one doing the terrorizing. Now, metaphorically, he is already in "my coffin" and his hate-filled daughters "tell me to die" (17). The monosyllabic language suggests the simplicity and constancy of Lear's thoughts: aging and death are the only things that he can think about.

This obsessive simplicity of fatalistic discourse is repeated in act 1, scene 6: a family that Lear has been staying with (he helps to manage their pigs) is attacked by a one-time lickspittle of Lear's—the now-deranged Warrington. Upon seeing this unholy reminder of the past, Lear says that "I'll die! I've seen a ghost. I'm going to die. That's why he came back. I'll die" (22). This formula of simple words expresses both a rational sense of mortality and an irrational sense of continued self-worth. Temporarily at least, Lear is over-looking his vexed legacy as an incompetent and tyrannical ruler. A local Boy gives Lear

some updates about the wall: it is being pulled down, he asserts, quite triumphantly. He goes on to recall the horrors of building it—"living in a grave" (25). The squalor of working in the mud to advance the pointless wall will remind most audience members of the Great War malady of trench foot: "feet used to swell with the mud. The stick of it even when you were asleep," the Boy recalls, bitterly (25). Sleep offers no respite from the horrors of building the wall. There is substantial dramatic irony here: the Boy does not know that Lear is the former king. He believes that he is articulating the thoughts of one bruised, exploited nobody to a fellow nobody. In a sense he is, but what really matters is that the wall has had a nefarious effect on Lear's country—building it has caused people to live lives that feel like living deaths. Although the outcast Lear now has no responsibility, he is confronted with his abysmal legacy of counterproductive exploitation of men and resources. He has tried to somehow defy aging and mortality by building an ageless wall—but the wall subsequently becomes a symbol of his impotence and of the folly of one of his successor rulers, Cordelia, who commences work on the wall. (This Cordelia is not a relative of Lear—Bond's play is a truly radical appropriation of Shakespeare's).

Lear, who has survived various judicial and quasi-paramilitary attacks by rabid servants of his daughters and who has been brutally blinded, now only lives for a substantial period and even develops a cult following in the rural community that has adopted him.[2] Eventually, he has a meeting with the remorseless Cordelia. He tells her not to continue building the wall. She responds with the sort of

2 The technological nature of the cruelty inflicted on Lear is described and analysed effectively by Simon Shepherd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 168.

monosyllabic, determined simple-mindedness that defined Lear's misrule: "We must" (84). It is a simplistic and brainless totalitarian response; as David L. Hirst reminds us, "Bond's condemnation of totalitarianism is unsparing" (135). Cordelia offers no real rational explanation for the necessity of the wall: as Lear himself states, she is continuing his legacy of irrational fear of putative enemies. Crucially, his late-life campaign against the wall has slowed down Lear's aging process. Indeed, he even fantasizes about holding off aging: "I have only one more wish—to live till I'm much older," he declares (85). He wants to impart wisdom, to teach—to make people realize the folly of material and metaphorical wall-building.

The climax recalls, with deep irony, the shooting incident at the start of the play, when Lear outrageously shot dead an alleged idler at the wall. The blinded, elderly Lear, armed with a shovel, decides to physically dismantle the wall and, with comic understatement, says: "I'm not as fit as I was" (88). It is gesture politics—and a fatal mistake because as soon as Lear breaks ground with his shovel, a hired hand of Cordelia summarily shoots him dead. The man who once shot people for not building the wall is killed quickly enough for trying to dismantle it.

The stage directions tell us that the shovel "*stays upright in the earth*" (88). Unlike Lear the shovel is erect, potent, but its symbolism might be more complex than is sometimes claimed. The symbolism of this scene has exercised Bond for half a century. As recently as April 2021, Bond, on his (excellent and substantial) website, railed against an academic who, Bond felt, had misrepresented the scene as being an absurdist symbol of futility and the pointlessness of confronting behemoths of injustice such as wage enslavement and prejudice ("Rough Notes"). The academic might regard the shovel as being an

ironic symbol of potency—its strength and potential mocks Lear's aged impotence. But if one sees the shovel in less ironic terms we may align our thoughts more closely with Bond's. Bond insists that Lear's attempt to dismantle the wall is not futile because it offers hope, light, a pathway forward. The shovel may remind some audience members of the mid-seventeenth-century offshoot of the Levellers: the Diggers sect. [3] "The Diggers' Song" of *circa* 1649 proudly and repetitively suggests that spades and hoes are phallic symbols of a collective agrarian will to power—a proto-Communistic forerunner of the hammer and sickle that Bond might approve of (Woudhuysen 464-66). If we see Lear's shovel as being an extension of him rather than an ironic counterpart to him then we can think that Lear's agedness is not a useless agedness after all. Once psychologically encased within his wall and now physically aged and decrepit, Lear has managed to transcend decline to present to us an image of a better future—a future when genuine change can happen with wo/men using whatever tools they can to challenge the self-serving but destructive wall-building mania of tyrants. Once murderous and inept, Lear has aged surprisingly well: he dies not as an old fool but as an old hero.

Cast in this light, one can regard the contempt shown the elderly Lear as both the driver of his radical change and his redemption. The final shovel standing proud in the earth points to a more nuanced and politically charged reading of the final scene. The circumstances of Lear's death are rich in irony, but his legacy offers hope, the shovel representative of his

3 For one of several comprehensive studies of Gerard Winstanley's Diggers movement, see John Gurney, *Brave Community: The Digger Movement in the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

conversion from authoritarian builder of walls to destroyer of walls.

Bingo: Shakespeare's willful catatonia and premature death

With its claustrophobic, small-town setting, its comparatively small number of characters, and its stress on the stifling gloom of life lived bitterly within a loveless family, *Bingo* seems like a chamber piece compared to the epic *Lear*. In *Bingo*, Bond effectively lifts some of the follies and aged vulnerabilities of Lear and projects them onto *King Lear*'s dramatist: William Shakespeare. The play, which was first performed at the Northcott Theatre, Devon, on November 13, 1973, depicts, unusually, a psychologically empty life and pitiful death of Shakespeare in 1616.

Fictional depictions of Shakespeare tend to be comic or rousing or at least affirmative in some way. For example, the American-made short film, *Master Will Shakespeare* (1936) presents Shakespeare as a sort of triumphant cowboy, an enterprising lone ranger who strolled into London town and took over the place. Similarly, *Will Shakespeare*, a John Mortimer-written television drama series from 1978, shows the dynamic upward trajectory of a supremely energetic man who is humbly holding horses for theatre patrons then swiftly replacing Christopher Marlowe as London's literary darling, seemingly within days. Many depictions are purely comic: G. B. Shaw's *Shakes versus Shav* (1949) is a puppet play that depicts a hysterically arrogant Shakespeare; in the *Doctor Who* story *The Shakespeare Code* (2007), Shakespeare is iconoclastically presented as a bad-breathed sex pest; and in the ongoing BBC sitcom, *Upstart Crow* (2016-present), Shakespeare is dramatized, reductively but amusingly, as an ordinary but vain

man who is obsessed with trivialities such as baldness and poor public transport.

The film *All is True* (2018), directed by and starring Kenneth Branagh, is unusual in that it does dramatize the aging and ailing Shakespeare. *All is True*, however, is affirmative because Shakespeare uses the period of his decline to effectively remarry his hitherto embittered wife, to grow a garden, to fight accusations of slander against his daughter, Susanna, to make up with and inspire the writing career of his other daughter, Judith, to reflect proudly on the scale of his theatrical achievements, and to lay to rest the ghost of his son, Hamnet. It is an inverse version of the *Hamlet* narrative. The crucial point is that in *All is True*, Shakespeare is presented to us as someone we would like—a liberal and generous man, a man supportive of women's writing, a man untouched by the bigotry of his age, a loving father, and, ultimately, a loyal husband. It is an affirmative, Bardolatrous construction of a Shakespeare we can admire in the twenty-first century West. *Bingo* runs counter to all of those other depictions of Shakespeare: in *Bingo*, Bond delivers a bleak depiction of a Shakespeare who is defined by a sense of worthlessness that comes partly from community contempt for his lost powers. Simon Jones describes Bond's Shakespeare as "lonely and failed" (452). Simply, in *Bingo*, Shakespeare has, by and large, not aged well.

Bingo is a play that is contrived to move slowly in terms of narrative and in terms of its protagonist's slowness of thought and physical inactivity. Some melodramatic events occur in the play: an executed body (the Young Woman) is gibbeted, displayed; local people campaign vigorously against a land Enclosure that Shakespeare has passively facilitated; a mentally unhinged individual (the Old Man) is shot in a confused scuffle;

and Shakespeare kills himself in a sordid and anti-climactic scene. But with the exception of the deliberately underwhelming demise of Shakespeare, these events happen just offstage. As Michael Patterson writes, *Bingo*'s "overall mood is contemplative rather than theatrical" (415). Michael Billington characterizes Bond's Shakespeare as being "brooding, largely silent . . . Sitting wanly" (228). This is an unresponsive Shakespeare who is almost impervious to any stimulant. He responds only vaguely to traumatic events that do not directly concern him. Significantly, the stage directions tell us that Shakespeare sits *"facing away from the body"* of the displayed, dead Young Woman (Bond, *Plays: Three* 35). The point is that Shakespeare, to his moral and psychological detriment, just does not engage with the injustices of the Jacobean society that he has flourished in.

Shakespeare shows no emotion when the Old Man dies and barely notices the plight of the doomed Young Woman even when she begs at his very house. He is also blithely indifferent to the catastrophic consequences of the Enclosure act for the local poor—an act that he facilitates by blithely agreeing to legally allow the instigator, William Combe, to use Shakespeare's personal land as part of the Enclosed complex. Shakespeare is not an evil character as such; rather, he is massively disengaged from the suffering endured by the have-nots of his era. The play, slowly, progresses two thematic developments simultaneously: Shakespeare ages and declines with remarkable speed; at the same time, his insight into his own feckless apathy increases. A cliché of tragedy since the Greek era is that tragic heroes achieve more insight about their own follies and turpitude as their public standing plummets. This play, then, might be thought of as a tragedy in that Shakespeare's insights into his own failings increase in inverse

proportion to the decline of his self-esteem and the increasingly hysterical revulsion for him by his own family. The fundamental tragedy is that Shakespeare realizes that he has done nothing to help others, only when it is too late—his literary powers, or at least, his motivation and drive to write, have burnt out.

Shakespeare already feels old at the start of the play, but his increasing sense of an irrevocable trajectory towards death is the only fast-moving force in the play. So *Bingo* is essentially a play about the deleterious effects of aging: effects that are almost parodically exaggerated. Shakespeare, after all, cannot be said to have been old during the period of the play's setting, 1614-16. This is not a history play, although the controversial Enclosure attempt referred to is historically documented. It is a play about the fictitious psychology of an individual who was fêted but who now feels impotent, useless, and who embraces physical and mental decline and literally has a distressing death wish—the suicide is, of course, entirely fictional. Early in the play, Shakespeare's shrewish daughter, Judith, slates Shakespeare for his lack of physical exertion: "You'll get old sitting there all day," she asserts excoriatingly (26). Shakespeare responds with pointed monosyllables: "I am old" (26). It is a simple exchange that will define the play: Shakespeare, barely fifty years old, has already retired from literary and public life. Bereft of ambition, he will do nothing in Stratford-upon-Avon except wither and expire. It is a self-fashioned, willful decline. As his decrepitude develops, his sense that his life's work failed to intervene in public wellbeing increases conterminously. It is an artistically contrived balance managed by Bond: Shakespeare's life force decreases as his insight into his work's pointlessness increases. The play never moves fast in terms of plot but Shakespeare's personal decline

is rapid—indeed, the speed of Shakespeare's decline can be gauged by his self-pitying comments about aging, self-pitying comments that are articulated in each of the play's six scenes.

Shakespeare both embraces and fears aging. His world in Stratford-upon-Avon is, aside from the occasional, hysterical ejaculations of highly-strung characters such as the doomed Young Woman, the Puritan firebrand (the Son), and the mentally deranged Old Man, quiet, still, almost sterile in its lifelessness. Indeed, one of the first stage directions instructs directors to depict an atmosphere of "*Emptiness and silence*" (15). Shakespeare does very little—actors playing the role must exhibit great discipline by curtailing all unnecessary body movements; this is an almost parodically slowed-down Shakespeare. He tells Combe that "I weed a bit. I get tired" (18). His sense of economic impotence is expressed early on too: asserting that he cannot take any financial risks because he can no longer earn, he reflects on his father, who "went bankrupt when he was old" (21). Shakespeare is haunted by memories of his aged, irresponsible father. Perhaps it is because of his own contempt for his late father that Shakespeare tolerates the scolding of his daughter, Judith, who is perpetually frustrated by Shakespeare's emotional unavailability and his activity-dodging, supine disposition. Judith laments: "Why d'you make it necessary for a child to speak to its parents in this way?" (31) In abnegating his patriarchal rule, Shakespeare is almost becoming childish—the concept of Shakespeare's "second childhood" is, perhaps, one of the more pedestrian tropes of what is a disturbing play that so viciously attacks complacent assumptions about Shakespeare's supposed benevolence.

Scene 4 is crucial: Shakespeare has a drinking binge with Ben Jonson. In the reverent Branagh film, *All Is True*, the drinking scene with Jonson is affirmative and cozy because

Jonson praises and extols Shakespeare's genius. But in Bond's irreverent play, Jonson can express only contempt for Shakespeare's disengagement from creative life. Shakespeare repeatedly articulates negative words to Jonson such as "No" and "Nothing" and says bluntly that he has "Nothing to say" (43). Perennially conscious of mortality, Shakespeare tells the half-listening, intoxicated Jonson, "Time goes. I'm surprised how old I've got" (45). The latter clause is a trifle ambiguous. Does Shakespeare mean that he is surprised that it is 1616 already and that he is already fifty-two? Or is he surprised at how aged and decrepit he feels? Either way, it is clear that Shakespeare's bitterness is to an extent shared by Jonson, who complains about a range of matters including financial hardship and growing up fatherless. Jonson projects a sort of wisdom onto Shakespeare—a wisdom that Shakespeare does not have. Sarcastically, he applauds Shakespeare for knowing "when it is time to die" (48). "At least you're dying," he says to Shakespeare (48). It is important that this life-hating rhetoric is articulated by Jonson as well as by Shakespeare: when the two greatest playwrights of the era are so blatantly unsatisfied by their art and their lives it is apparent that this society is a broken and heartless one. The last two scenes depict Shakespeare's profoundly unheroic death. He catches a chill in the snow, observing meanwhile that this will be "perhaps the last snow I'll see" (56). He says that he "didn't want to die." The use of past tense is pointed: it means, of course, that now he does want to die.

In the last scene, we have a bedroom death scenario that is reminiscent of the death scenes in some of Shakespeare's plays: the sepulchral atmosphere brings to mind the tomb scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the catastrophic lack of communication between Shakespeare and his ignored wife reminds one of the

non-meeting of minds between Othello and Desdemona. Shakespeare dies despising himself for not doing anything to help England's poor and abused. "I could have done so much," he mumbles to the Son, who expresses no interest in Shakespeare's words (62). Once England's greatest showman and impresario, Shakespeare has no audience at all now. And he has done nothing for that past audience rather than entertain them and reinforce the status quo of exploitation, division, and state-sanctioned murder of dissident thinkers. Shakespeare degenerates into a King Lear-like confusion about his status: "How long have I been dead?" he asks in soliloquy (65). Shakespeare literally dies with a whimper—as is made clear in the stage directions (66). Indeed, it is only in the stage directions that we learn that "*Shakespeare has killed himself*" (66); we don't even get to clearly see the once-great man take his own life. It is a massive, deliberate anti-climax. Shakespeare has petered out. He has accelerated his own aging process and eventually resorted to self-murder. Shakespeare's simultaneous contempt for his once-lucrative career and fatalistic response to aging manifests similarly in the character of the third of Bond's Shakespeare-related, aging-scarred male figures: Trench.

The Worlds: Trench's hysterical reaction to enforced retirement

Timon of Athens is, on one level, the simplest of Shakespearean narratives: a rich man is surrounded by fawning friends; he loses his money; his friends disappear; he spends the rest of the play cursing his one-time associates and railing against humanity in general; and he helps guerrillas attack his once-loved Athens. For *The Worlds*, a play that was initially

performed by Bond-directed university students at Newcastle on March 8, 1979, Bond lifted this simple narrative and transplanted it into late 1970s, industrial strife-afflicted Britain. [4] Trench is the Timon figure: he begins the play as an apparently loved Chief Executive of his own company TCC; he soon loses that position; his friends ensure that he is properly marginalized; he loses his sense of reason; and he eventually helps terrorists to attack his old company and, by extension, capitalism in general. As well as the temporal and geographical change in setting there is one main innovation in Bond's handling of the Timon narrative: his character, Trench, is seen to be a victim of aging and, specifically, of society's prejudice against and contempt for those who are no longer economically useful.

Trench is an egoist. He begins the play festooned with vainglorious riches, self-praising his thirty-year rise from post-War obscurity to moneyed pomp. In the first four sentences of the play—all short sentences—he says "I" four times and "me" once: his world is the world he has self-fashioned (9). [5] It is his world, he thinks. His lackeys indulge him at this stage, even approving of his patronage of portrait painting and poetry—a callow, consumerist engagement with the arts that he shares with Shakespeare's Timon (11-12, 15). Trench is kidnapped by terrorists from the RRA, a thinly disguised version of the then-virulent Provisional Irish Republican Army, a left-wing group that had kidnapped high-profile businessmen during the 1970s. Trench is released and returns to the company: he beams with

4 For a full account of the Newcastle Playhouse production of *The Worlds*, see chapter 2 of Ian Stuart, *Politics in Performance: The Production Work of Edward Bond, 1978-1990* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996) 37-63.

5 All quotations from *The Worlds* are taken from Edward Bond, *Plays: Four*. London: Methuen, 1992.

pride as he reflects on the apparently warm welcome his staff gave him (33). But upstairs things have changed. He has been dumped from his own company: he is too old, he lacks dynamism, he has not paid board members well enough, he is yesterday's man.

Trench's intellectual and emotional decline is immediate: he rails and rails against his fair-weather friends; his ranting about "inane toadying" and "thirty pieces of silver" is a match for the dyspeptic ranting of Timon (42-43). And, like Timon in Shakespeare's play, Trench pretends to offer hospitality to his one-time colleagues but abuses them with insults and an elaborate but coarse practical joke. As Jenny S. Spencer put it, Trench shouts with "passionate outrage and increasingly sonorous monologues" (178). For all this bluster, Trench is a greatly diminished figure. Part 1 ends with Trench sitting alone on his floor and saying to himself that he is "afraid" (48). By the start of part 2, Trench is "dirty and unshaven" (51). He has gone to seed. He has now embraced economic dysfunctionality and rejects all superego appurtenances of presentation, hygiene, and politeness. He is helpless in his agedness; he has stopped trying to be productive or even presentable.

The play ends with Trench shooting another kidnap victim—an innocent chauffeur. The action is confused: it can only be assumed that Trench kills the man because he can see no reason for the man to want to live. By this stage, Trench has given up on humanity as a species: "The world's already ended except for the crying," he exclaims (73). Trench, at this stage, is wearing only a blanket: he looks less like the Chief Executive that he was and more like a political prisoner on a dirty protest. This is significant because the line between the man of commerce and the man of terror has become blurred. If

anything, Trench is more nihilistic than any terrorist because at least the terrorist takes action to attempt to improve things. Trench despairs utterly; he has given up on "[m]ankind . . . A clown with a gun. An idiot with a stick . . . The human species. Homo mob" (74). It is language that recalls the hollow non-philosophy of Macbeth as much as Timon of Athens's misanthropy. [6] Indeed, Trench refers to the imprisoned chauffeur—repeatedly—as "it" (78). He surrenders to the police at the end of his play: now profoundly pathetic, he does not even have the sort of onstage death that is afforded to both Lear and Shakespeare in *Lear* and *Bingo*.

The Worlds is a complicated play that combines relative realism with a quasi-Brechtian epic structure; pathetic scenes of pity with burlesque and gratuitous scenes of obscenity and violence. Indeed, Bond is synonymous with stage violence: as William J. Free puts it succinctly and with agreeable understatement, certain scenes in various Bond plays "challenge the composure of their viewers" (87). Bond himself has said that his plays are not violent—they just have violent things in them and this is necessary because violence is "simply a fact of life" (Stoll 415). (The point is valid, of course, but the distinction is a fine one.) Complicated discussions about the corrupting powers of money are grafted onto the play and there is indeed a challenging debate about the nature of violence and the ersatz legitimacy of state-controlled repression of strikers and dissidents. But *The Worlds* can work on a much more basic, personalized level: simply, it can be read

6 *Macbeth* is alluded to specifically in Part Two, scene five, when two striking workers, Ray and Terry, say, fatalistically, that if the chauffeur "gets shot" then "He's shot"—it echoes almost word-for-word the dialogue in *Macbeth* when Lady Macbeth blithely says that if "we fail" to assassinate King Duncan then "we fail" (72).

as a man reacting hysterically to enforced retirement. In a capitalist system that fetishizes profit and casts aside the economically unproductive, the aged are marginalized and despised.

Trench has no hobbies or interests outside of his company; his interest in the arts is a mere pretense. Work is everything to him. When that is removed, he loses all sense of humanity and he loses all sense of proportion. *The Worlds* is not technically a tragedy, but it is a tragic depiction of contemporary society's detestation of aging and the aged. "My friends killed me," laments Trench (57). His oleaginous, self-serving colleagues did not kill him. They merely retired Trench, their one-time patriarch and meal ticket. In doing so they condemned him to a sort of living death—a paradoxical state of mental paralysis that Trench to some extent shares with both Lear and Shakespeare.

Conclusion: Pity for the aged
A more humane side of Bond's oeuvre

In the section on *Lear*, it was pointed out that in April 2021 Bond, aged eighty-six, castigated an academic for what he believed to be a misreading of Lear's effort to dismantle the wall. In his ninth decade, Bond remains belligerent, combatant, difficult. His depiction of the academic as typifying "the moral squalor, irresponsibility and indulgent triviality of our culture" may seem a little over-the-top, even ludicrous ("Rough Notes"). But Bond says some other things in that piece—important things. He takes time to refer to himself as a "socialist and a humanist." It would be easy to oversimplify Bond's understanding of what humanism is exactly. But the point is that Bond cares about humans and believes that they can do good things. They can even improve in age: Lear, blinded,

humiliated, and despised in his aged infirmity can even show the way to a better future—his attack on the wall is not a futile gesture but a call for resistance, a start towards radical action. In *Bingo*, Shakespeare is a pathetic figure who acquiesces in an abusive Enclosure act and fails to even speak to his wife but he at least gains some insight into the uselessness of his art as he sees it through aged, jaded eyes. Insight into one's failings is at least better than self-delusional self-righteousness. And Trench in *The Worlds* is, like Lear, more sinned against than sinning because his forced retirement is done so swiftly and ruthlessly that it seems little less violent than the actions of kidnapping terrorists, white-collar fraudsters, and aggressive, greedy union leaders. All three leading characters do and say despicable things at times, but all three reflect on their aging processes and at least modify their hitherto selfish and simplistic assumptions about their sense of patriarchal and economic entitlement.

Aging means different things to different people in different places at different times. But aging is something of a leveller: suicide notwithstanding it is inescapable; it is a fundamental human experience and a fundamental human trauma. Delese Wear describes aging, aptly, as "one of the most mysterious and inevitable shared human experiences" (xvii-xviii). Bond's depictions of capitalist societies in various stages of development are invariably jaundiced, bleak and manically violent—but it seems clear that Bond does not see things only in terms of dialectics and material bases. He does care about people. And he cares specifically about those who are cast aside for the irrational reason of age alone.

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