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The Sacred Dragon in the Woods: on Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*

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“Friends! Outcasts. Leeches. Undesirables,” Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron proclaims in Jez Butterworth’s 2009 play *Jerusalem*, “a blessing on you, and upon this beggars’ banquet. This day we draw a line in the chalk, and push back hard against the bastard pitiless busybody council, and drive them from this place for ever” (50). It is St George’s Day, during the first decade of the 21st century, in a clearing in the woods outside a little town in Wiltshire, and that same morning, Johnny has been served a note from the Kennet and Avon council, demanding that he remove his trailer from the site. The action of the play, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, London, thus takes place in the context of the main character’s impending eviction from a place he has illegally occupied for decades. Always situated at the fringes of society, Johnny will now officially be ousted from the community. On St George’s Day, the date on which the nation commemorates the legend of the beast-killing knight and traditionally exorcises its monsters, civilisation is getting prepared to slay the dragon in his lair.

This article will trace how *Jerusalem* portrays, in Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron, the figure of what Giorgio Agamben calls the *homo sacer*, the bare life, as a character that encapsulates both the scapegoat and the monster, and on which thus the dreams and the fears of the community equally settle (Agamben, *passim*). His liminal state of being signifies the watershed between accepted and unaccepted, desired and undesired, and ultimately between disenfranchised and free. In this way, the play is revealed as a depiction not only of the state of England, but of how contemporary societies treat their outcasts.

In the development of his theory of the *homo sacer*, Agamben derives from Aristotle two Greek terms for the state of living: *zoē* for the simple fact of being alive common to all living beings, animals, men and god alike, and *bios*, for “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group”, a life that has a certain quality to it (*ibid.*: 1). *Bios* means to be a citizen of a *polis*, to be able to participate in the shaping of society, in the cultural and political life of the community – what is denoted by ‘the good life’. Therefore, if a person is cast out of their community, stripped of their civil rights, of their human rights and their social and legal status, they become the Roman *homo sacer*, the one “who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (8, emphasis in the original). What is left is the bare life, the *zoē*, the contact with which is taboo.

Linked to the Roman *sacer*, 'taboo' in the Freudian sense is that which is sacred: both consecrated and impure, uniting the maleficent and the beneficent (Freud: 311, Girard: 271). The taboo calls forth a reaction of either awe or horror and revulsion, as well as a terror of physical or mental contact, caused by fear of contamination (Freud: 218-19). Here, it is noteworthy that, anthropologically, taboo as the sacred comes first; the division into evil and good follows later. Freud defines the taboo as the root of human ethical and legislative codes (317). The taboo, he specifies, does not only cling to the one who does what is forbidden, but also to people in specific circumstances, to these circumstances themselves, and to impersonal objects. The person who broke the taboo becomes taboo, due to the dangerous ability to tempt others to violate the rule. Provoking envy, the one who breaks taboos is thus truly contagious in the sense of every example inviting imitation (324). Agamben stresses that the ancient meaning of the term *sacer* confronts us with the enigmatic figure of the sacred, which "before or beyond the religious, constitutes the first paradigm of the political realm of the West" (9). The boundaries of the *polis*, the centre of society, are marked by the exclusion of the *homo sacer*. The sacred, and with it the *homo sacer*, is thus both a religious and a political concept which can only be fully grasped if one accepts the validity of both aspects (80).

The primary object of taboo, the *homo sacer*, can be found at the centre of *Jerusalem*, right at the heart of the English countryside. Johnny's first appearance on stage already establishes him as a character on the edge: at the same time limping and strutting, with the puffed-out chest of a rooster, he displays the "balance of a dancer, or an animal" (Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 9). There is indeed something not altogether human about him. His constitution is clearly more robust than that of the average person if his breakfast of raw egg, milk, vodka and speed is anything to go by (10). Later in the play, he will display signs of an uncanny power: whenever somebody looks deep into his eyes, the wind picks up and the stage begins to tremble. It is this inherent ambiguity which marks him as the sacred, more clearly even than his status as social outcast.

The youth of the village flock to him to evade the dullness and disillusionment of their lives, to get inebriated, to consume stronger stimulants, and to imagine a state of greatness, recognition and significance that their lives do not offer otherwise. In a raucous counter-event to the twee and commercialised annual village fair, Johnny and his followers celebrate his last day on the site from which the council intends to evict him. But Johnny's friends are fickle.

While they appreciate the supply of class-A drugs and raw entertainment, they also recognise him as a person whose societal status is not comparable to their own. The serving notice under the Public Health Act and Pollution Control already links him, in the public perception, to vermin and pest control, further stressing how the *homo sacer* is perceived as existing in “a zone of indistinction between the human and the animal” (Agamben, 106). Referring to the concerted action the residents of the new estate have taken against Johnny to expel him from the woods, the young butcher Davey admits:

They've got a point, though, haven't they? I'm not being funny, right, but if you're sat in your brand-new house you've sweat your bollocks off to buy, and find out four hundred yards away there's some ogre living in a wood... I bet it never said in the brochure: 'Detached house, three beds with garden overlooking wood with free troll. Free ogre what loves trance music, deals cheap spliff and whizz, don't pay no tax, and has probably got AIDS. Guaranteed non-stop aggravation and danger.' I bet that weren't in the brochure. (30)

Simultaneously awestruck and repelled, despising him as much as they adore him, the young are drawn to the mystery of Johnny Byron because he fuels their desires and allows them to feel at the same time recklessly wild and utterly safe in the woods. Johnny's constant and blatant defiance of any social norm, the way he fiercely embraces his status as the outcast, does not only provoke the local council. Troy Whitworth, the thuggish stepfather of 15-year old Phaedra, the local May Queen who has been missing for almost a week, arrives at the clearing in search of the girl, blaming Johnny for her disappearance and demanding her immediate return:

JOHNNY. Troy, mate. What say we bury the hatchet?

TROY. You deaf as well as daft? We'll bury the hatchet all right. Right in your fuckin' skull, pikey. You *did*. You *diddicoy* maggot. Living on a rubbish tip. Wozzel Maggot. Stig of the Dump. Thinks he's the Pied Piper. (80)

What Troy does not realise is that Johnny does not think he is the Pied Piper, he *is* the Pied Piper. A supreme story-teller, he twists all narratives, allows for dreams and nightmares, until nobody, least of all the audience, knows for certain what might be true. Simultaneously the Green Man and Robin Hood, Pan (both the god and Peter), Puck and Oberon, Falstaff and Prospero, Johnny channels all these trickster figures into one. Such is the power of Johnny's storytelling that, the more outlandish his tales become, the more one wonders if he might not be telling the truth after all in his stories of meeting "a giant that built Stonehenge" (57), of having the rarest blood in the country, of dying and returning from the dead, of the truth and something more uncanny being written in his eyes. Wolfgang Funk draws attention to the fact that Johnny's account of his virgin birth on the tip of a bullet displays an obvious parallel to the birth of Christ, as does Johnny's supposed death and resurrection after a failed stunt (130). Johnny's sidekick Ginger relates the episode as follows:

They pronounce him stone dead, St. John's [the ambulance] put a blanket over him. Paperwork, everything. All the mums are crying, how they should build a statue to him in the town square, when suddenly everyone turns round and he's gone. He's vanished. There's just a blanket with nothing under it. They follow this trail of blood across the field, past the whirler-swirler, into the beer tent, up to the bar, where he's stood there finishing a pint of Tally-Ho.

DAVEY. Bollocks.

GINGER. On my life. He just gone teethfirst into a lorry doing a hundred mile an hour, bounced jaw, no teeth, compressed spine, on top of which he's just spent ten minutes in the hereafter, and he gets up and hobbles in that tent, pays for his pint –'Keep the change, love' – and downs it in one. Walks out. Walks it off. (32)

Johnny has always been the community's outcast, frequently banned from all public houses in the area. Yet he was admired in the past as a daredevil and is appreciated in the present as the one who, as actor Mark Rylance suggests, offers a space to young people which "the parents, society don't enter", a space where the village youth will celebrate their initiation rites (Butterworth and Rylance). He embodies the blessed and impure aspects of the Roman pre-religious *sacer* and invites both the attraction and revulsion associated with the Freudian taboo.

While the central character can be seen as an embodiment of the sacred, Butterworth's play prompted critics to describe the performance as a profoundly moving, quasi-religious experience, inextricably bound to the aspect of live performance and the theatre as a public space in which a sacrificial ritual is being performed. "There must be minor deities who have received less adulation than Mark Rylance [the actor who portrays Johnny] has," Andrzej Lukoski remarks, "his astonishing final scene, bellowing mystic defiance at the implacable advance of modernity, is as close to real magic as you'll find in our cold, tame city". When *Jerusalem* returned to London's West End in 2011, after a successful run on Broadway and a Tony award for the main actor, the tone of the reviews changed from already strong praise to fervent enthusiasm, linking the attendance of a performance of the play to a revelation.

"The present crisis we're dealing with began 300, 400 years ago," playwright Jez Butterworth claims in an interview broadcast on *Theater Talk* in April 2011, "when science took over from any kind of ritualised religion in our life to explain what it is that we're doing here and was supposed to provide us entirely with our sense of meaning". Arguing that this development took away people's "sense of mystery and belief", he acknowledges the human urge to position oneself within a narrative, to 'be part of a plot'. This is an urge which was already articulated in Mark Ravenhill's infamous play *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). Indeed, "we all need stories" (Ravenhill 66) is probably one of the most-quoted lines from 1990s In-Yer-Face theatre. "What are West-End theatres for?" Butterworth asks in an interview for *The Guardian* also from 2011, "what place do they hold in our consciousness?". He comes to a conclusion which might be considered unusual today, yet is utterly rooted in theatre's history. Linking the public, ritualistic space of the theatre, of live performance, to sanctuaries and thus acknowledging the theatre's original function as a spiritual place where public ritual would be re-enacted for and by a community, he says: "They're churches ... places where you come along and you evoke anxieties and you deal with them together. That's what they're for" (Butterworth, 'Playwright'). *Jerusalem* provides the theatre-going public with an experience akin to witnessing a miracle and simultaneously confronts a whole demographic affluent enough to afford tickets for a West End show with a representation of the anathema they mostly choose to disregard.

The missing May Queen Phaedra, whose rendition of William Blake's poem 'Jerusalem' (1808) as set to music by Hubert Parry (1916) thematically frames the play, is revealed to have stayed at Johnny's trailer all along. She seems to have found sanctuary with the sacred, the *homo sacer*. A transgression has indeed taken place – it is implied she is hiding from her abusive stepfather, but of course, in the eyes of society, a 15-year-old minor should probably not be staying with Johnny, either. An elfin creature herself for the time of her reign as May Queen, her on-stage interactions with Johnny suggest innocence on both accounts: Johnny assumes the role of a forest sprite hiding and protecting his queen – “I don't expect nothing from you, fairy,” he tells her (102). Yet her stepfather sees her presence at Johnny's trailer as proof of his guilt and as reason enough to violently assault him. The ensuing attack is likely to be prompted not by Johnny's hiding of Phaedra, but by his earlier suggestion that Troy abuses her, and that, years ago, he already caused Troy to face something terrifying inside him:

JOHNNY: Do you remember that night we took a pack of cards? The old ones with the devils on the back. And we laid them in a circle. ... We poured a glass of wine into a plate ... like a blood-red mirror, and you took the candle and you gazed into the mirror. ... You shook like a leaf. You couldn't stop shaking. Couldn't speak. You were terrified, boy. From that day, you stopped coming to see me. ... Have you come to play again, boy? I still got the cards. You want to play again? (81)

The *homo sacer* thus also upsets the community's order by acting as a mirror, not only by allowing people to shine, but also by reflecting their darkness back upon them.

In his wide-ranging study of 1972, *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard argues that “derision of one form or another plays a large part in the negative feelings that find expression in the course of the ritual sacrifice” (268). A scapegoat rite involves a surrogate victim appeasing the violence within the community. Often, the victim is destroyed; it is always expelled, at which point the community considers itself to be free from infection (281). The scapegoat has evolved to the person who has become a taboo, the *homo sacer*: the one whose life is sacred, defined purely by being excluded from the *polis* and stripped of all civil rights (Agamben, 8). When Troy and two of his accomplices exact their revenge, Johnny's friends

have left him, the officers of Kennet and Avon Council have reiterated their eviction notice, and the May Queen has taken her leave. The community aims to exorcise their monsters by means of a public sacrifice which is turned into a spectacle. And so, while the council is bringing shields, batons and dogs into position at the edge of Rooster's Wood, the outcast is violently beaten and marked as anathema: Troy brands him with two crosses on his face (Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 104).

Customarily, the narrative of a ritual sacrifice would demand that a transgression take place beforehand to make the community look for a scapegoat. Yet in *Jerusalem*, the sacrifice occurs at a seemingly arbitrary point in time, so long has the community been disintegrating. As it reflects on the community's apparent shortcomings, the play offers a portrayal not only of a single outcast, but also of a whole generation robbed of perspectives and purpose. The imbalance in the community, which the would-be dragon-slayers attempt to correct on St George's Day, stems from a more general imbalance in a society that has left part of its population behind. Of course, the actual sacrilege occurs when the sacred is being defiled: as Johnny had already held the status of the *homo sacer* he should have remained safe from sacrifice.

The English countryside is a place that only recently regained recognition in British theatre and rarely appears on stages such as the Royal Court's, which in recent years has mostly produced gritty urban plays. But even as Butterworth's play with its set design of real trees and live chicken and tortoises (designed by Ultz for the 2009 production, see Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 6) demonstrates a powerful return of the revamped pastoral to the contemporary stage, the play delivers a gloomy portray of rural England. It is home to an overlooked part of the population, the disillusioned lower middle class, deprived of its individuality and pride, void of a distinctive identity. The local public houses are under the control of large breweries, the annual fair mirrors stereotypical game and talent shows, and the common culture of the English countryside is largely being destroyed, replaced by commercialised Englishness. Discussing Englishness in the play, Funk points to the "stultifying displays of simulated tradition that capitalism and the event culture of today have reduced it to" (130). In what could possibly be described as a depiction of the current economy, the prevailing feeling is one of disillusionment. "Mother, what is this dark place?"

Johnny claims to have asked his mother upon his birth, to which she replied: "'Tis England, my boy. England" (Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 44).

Critics such as Libbie Purves and Andrew Marr have remarked on the prophetic features of the play. In its portrayal of the current economy and a lower middle class which increasingly perceives itself as disenfranchised, it hints at the sell-off of the English countryside "via contracts and kickbacks" (Purves 2011) as much as it seems to have anticipated the 2011 'London Riots'. In an earlier attempt to explain the violent urban protests which took place in the suburbs of Paris in May 2005 Slavoj Žižek stressed the lack of any ideologically rationalised hope amongst the protesters, of any further demands by them. The riots were based on a demand for recognition, "simply a direct effort to gain *visibility*" (*Violence*: 63-65, emphasis in the original). This acknowledgment of the ghosts in the midst of the community is a vital step towards the understanding of the general state of exception, as it is in these protests that the previously and normally invisible bare life suddenly becomes visible. Commenting on the disturbances in London in August 2011, Žižek again points to sociologists and editorial-writers' "desperate attempt to find meaning in the riots", which represented, in effect, "zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing" ('Zero-Degree' 28). He acknowledges that the protesters were "underprivileged and de facto socially excluded", but not exactly living in abject poverty (*ibid.*). Again, the lack of any identifiable programme points towards an "ideological-political predicament" in which opposition to the system cannot be articulated by proposing any realistic alternative and will instead culminate in a "meaningless outburst" (*ibid.*). Arguing that the riots were partly a consequence of a conservative ideology which fuelled man's basic instinct of tribalism and territoriality, Žižek concludes that "on British streets during the unrest, what we saw was not men reduced to 'beasts', but the stripped-down form of the 'beast' produced by capitalist ideology" (*ibid.*). The setup of frontlines in *Jerusalem* exposes a society set upon stamping out the element which seems to threaten the territory to which they feel entitled. Just some years earlier, when community spirit was still more apparent and the local residents did not yet feel so utterly disenfranchised, they might not have been too concerned.

Stressing that the 2011 conflict in London was "between two poles of the underprivileged: those who have succeeded in functioning within the system versus those who are too frustrated to go on trying", Žižek agrees with Zygmunt Bauman, who describes the

riots as acts of “defective and disqualified consumers” (*ibid.*). In his article ‘The London Riots – On Consumerism coming Home to Roost’, Bauman points out that because members of contemporary society define themselves according to their ability to consume – “supermarkets ... are our temples” – to be a have-not and thus not be able to shop means to live “a life unfulfilled” (Baumann), to be deprived of life’s meaning. If belonging to the contemporary *polis* is defined by having the ability to contribute by consuming goods, not being able to perform this activity consequently constitutes a loss of *bios*: the citizen is turned into the *homo sacer*, included in politics only “in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben, 11). In Agamben’s analysis of the relation between the exclusion of the sacred from the *polis* and the constitution of the state of exception, he argues that, as the state of exception gradually becomes the rule, the bare life, formerly located outside of the political realm, increasingly overlaps with it, as “exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē* ... enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction” (9). As the differences wear down, citizens are effectively banned from active participation while living inside the political realm.

The looting and destruction of shops may be understood to express a genuine protest. As Žižek argues: “You call on us to consume while simultaneously depriving us of the means to do it properly – so here we are doing it the only way we can!” (‘Zero-Degree’: 28). The violence in the riots “is impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force,” he says, “it is envy masked as carnival” (*ibid.*). A similar sentiment can be marked in *Jerusalem*, where Johnny attempts to guide his friends into “the Flintock Rebellion” and proclaims, with a wry sense of self-recognition: “For today, I, Rooster Byron, and my band of educationally subnormal outcasts shall swoop and raze your poxy village to dust” (Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 53). While it is apparent that the attack on the village will not ever actually take place – not least because the would-be rebels are far too intoxicated and soon become distracted – the frustration with the general bleak outlook to an uneventful, inconsequential future is equally tangible throughout the play. The prospect of losing access to Rooster’s Wood, the liminal space outside the *polis* where the young could temporarily escape the confines of civic society and yet were safe within realm of the sacred, constitutes yet another public limitation of choice.

Recently, the UK's problematic attitude towards its social outsiders has become rather apparent: the controversial eviction of the Irish Travellers from their site on Dale Farm, Essex in October 2011 coincided with the reprise of *Jerusalem* in the London West End, an unforeseen concurrence the reverberations of which nonetheless lent a certain gravitas to the play. Correspondingly, the current portrayal of travelling communities on popular documentary television shows like Channel Four's *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* (2010-2012) and *Gypsy Blood* (2012) has provoked a twofold public reaction, displaying both fascination and revulsion (see Dean, Saner, Wollaston). Equally situated at the border of civic life by exclusion and securely fastened into the centre of it by being driven from their sites and forced to settle inside the *polis*, the communities are turned into the outcasts in the midst of society.

Just as Blake's poem asks after the purpose of the land, so Butterworth's *Jerusalem* raises the question of whom the forests in Britain belong to: do the woods in the play – "holy land", as Johnny's friend Lee calls them (Butterworth, *Jerusalem*: 72) – actually belong to Kennet and Avon council, or to the people of the land? Here, too, the play is timely: the sell-off and privatisation of Britain's forests began in 2010 and reached new peaks in 2011. "How many houses are you building?" Johnny asks the Community Liaison Officers as they return for a final warning, and he continues:

Who gets the contracts? Who gets the kickbacks? You're right. Kids come here.
Half of them are safer here than they are at home. You got nowhere else to go,
come on over. The door's open. You don't like it, stay away. What the fuck do you
think an English forest is for? (98)

By alluding to a poem which condemns the devastating effects of the industrial revolution on Britain's rural population and which challenges the agenda that brings with it "pollution and child labour and the excesses of early industrialisation" (Rylance in Butterworth and Rylance), the play criticises the selling-out to corporate entities. It entertains the idea that the country is longing for something else, for more meaning, an element of the sacred, that is the limit concept embracing both the religious and the political connotation of the term, to be found "among those dark satanic mills" (Blake 1804: plate 2). Refusing to back down after the community has cast him out and stripped him of his humanity, the sacred man in *Jerusalem*

fights back, as Johnny's call to arms evokes the spirited third and fourth stanza of Blake's poem:

Surrender, South Wiltshire! You are outnumbered. I have you surrounded. For at my back is every Byron boy that e'er was born an Englishman. And behind them bay the drunken devil's army and we are numberless. Rise up! Rise up, Cormoran. Woden. Jack-of-Green. Jack-in-Irons. Thunderdell. Búro, Blunderbore, Gog and Magog, Galligantus, Vili and Vé, Yggdrasil, Brutus of Albion. Come, you drunken spirits. Come, you battalions. You fields of ghosts who walk these green plains still. Come, you giants! (108-9)

As his time runs out, Johnny bangs the drum allegedly given to him by "a giant who built Stonehenge" (57) and, claiming lineage to a host of Anglo-Saxon and English mythological and legendary liminal figures, places a curse on the community that banishes him. Just as Agamben describes the *homo sacer* as the defining point of modern societies, the marker between *polis* and 'wilderness', Johnny, beating the pulse of the 'holy land', of Blake's Jerusalem, turns out to be the beating heart of the community, about to be ripped out of the forest and leaving only scorched earth behind.

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