

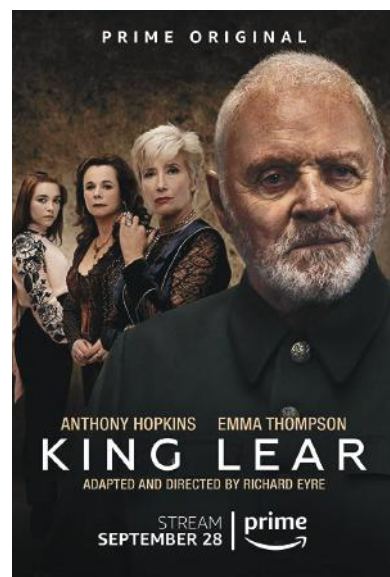
Anthony Hopkins in King Lear

Reviewed by Charles Boyle

King Lear. BBC-TV (2018), 1:55 hours. Prime Video from Amazon.

King Lear continues to attract modern interpreters: the latest movie version of *King Lear*, starring Anthony Hopkins in the title role, was produced and broadcast by the BBC in 2018 and is available as a Prime Video from Amazon.

Director Richard Eyre, who also provided the screenplay, has edited it down to just under two hours, but that's only one of the problems with this production. Such severe editing itself leads to problems of trading off a tightening of the plot lines, especially the parallel stories of Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons, that is, figurative blindness vs. literal blindness, etc. It also comes at the expense of individual characters, especially the Fool, for the Fool's lines are cut to a bare minimum. When added to the fact that he disappears by the middle of the play, he winds up being there, yet not being there. Moreover, he is played by Karl Johnson as an old man, not a youth, and certainly not as Lear's alter-ego. In his scenes he looks like someone who has wandered into the wrong room. Of course, all the humor that surrounds his exchanges with Lear has vanished. It reminded



me of Laurence Olivier's decision to cut Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from his staging of *Hamlet*; yes, the basic plot is not affected much, but much is lost.

Still, *King Lear* is all about Lear, the role of a lifetime. So, what do we get from Anthony Hopkins, one of the best actors of his generation? In his illustrious career he has played Lear, also played Sir in *The Dresser* (about an actor who plays Lear), and was the star twenty years ago in what many consider one of the better adaptations of Shakespeare to film, Julie Taymor's *Titus*. On the DVD commentary for *Titus*, Hopkins shared his thoughts on Shakespeare and stage acting. He doesn't much like either, which is why he announced his retirement from the stage in 1989, shortly after playing Lear. In an interview with *The New York Times* (9/26/2018) he said:

I think there was and still is probably something in me that balked against the dark "seriousness" of everything to do with acting.... A problem of my own creation was a feeling of alienation, not being up to the mark, not educated—all that mishmash of insecurity.

It was that experience that helped drive him to his decision to retire from the stage—and from Shakespeare. He found film much more enjoyable. Interestingly, it was his appearance in a 2015 television production of *The Dresser* that led him back to playing Lear, and also had him working with Eyre, who eventually convinced him to do this *King Lear*.

Yet his performance here made me think he still hasn't warmed up, decades later, to either Shakespeare or the stage. While many major critics raved over this production of *King Lear* and Hopkins, I was left cold. One reviewer on the IMDb website summed it up perfectly: "Hopkins performance has two gears—scenery chewing and shouty scenery chewing." It is a one note performance and not a very good note. At times I couldn't help thinking he was falling back on Hannibal Lecter and Titus Andronicus.

The performances around him are, in my estimation, also not very good. Both Emma Thompson as Goneril and Emily Watson as Regan, two very good actresses, give one note performances also. These two women are supposed to be princesses, real princesses, in regal gowns. In this production, from the beginning, they look as if they were a couple of housewives. The depths into which these people are soon to fall don't truly resonate if there are no heights from which to fall.

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Finally, then, we have Cordelia, played by Florence Pugh, the character whose actions drive the whole play. One of the most interesting things I derived from this production was Lear's famous line, cradling the dead Cordelia: "My poor fool is hanged." Cordelia is shown with a rope around her neck, clearly harkening back to the line from Lear earlier that he came upon rebels hanging her, tried to save her, but failed. So, this production has chosen to make it crystal clear that Cordelia is the hung fool.

This is of some note since many critics over the years have considered that the "hung" fool is in fact The Fool, even that the lines "my poor fool is hanged" can be taken as a self-reference in which Lear is acknowledging that he (also a fool) has learned a lesson. In any event, for the line to recall The Fool, we would need a production that made much more of The Fool than this one did. So the line is spoken but doesn't resonate at all. Not to mention that the whole final scene is, in my opinion, botched. First Goneril's and Regan's bodies are brought out on carts, then Cordelia's, also on a cart, wrapped in what looks like a body bag. When the bag is pulled back, we can see the rope around her neck. Lear does not enter carrying her and he never really cradles her.

Nonetheless, I have been among those who thought the fool line really was meant to recall The Fool and his relationship to the foolish Lear, so the prospect of the fool clearly being the "hung" Cordelia was intriguing—especially considering the unmistakable presence of The Fool in the first half of the play. But when considered within the context of the choices made in *this* production of *King Lear*, I realized this was actually just another poor decision by Eyre, since he had already thrown away the Fool in Acts I and II, and thus no resonance could occur at the end. To top it off, he did in fact make a decision to reference the Fool later in the play. When Lear is wandering about mad, pushing a shopping cart around an abandoned mall, he is wearing the same hat (a fedora) that the Fool wore. But that's a gimmick, not an insight.

That's the story of this production—a lack of insight. All of Shakespeare's plays, whether they are comedy, drama or history, are permeated with humor. It's one of the reasons we consider Shakespeare to be the greatest playwright we know. In this play the most humorous person is the Fool—and I would argue, the most important, because he is, in fact, Lear's conscience. He should be someone young (Lear mostly addresses the Fool as "Boy"), yet wise beyond his age. In this production he is just an old fool, off to the side, with half his dialogue gone, leaving the rest meaningless.

Finally, we should turn our attention to the subject of the authorship. For Oxfordians, who have a real life lived in Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, some plays are "easy" to draw parallels to, such as *Hamlet* (autobiography), the history plays (commentary on government and succession), the

early court comedies (the Queen is the audience), etc. However, *Lear* stands apart from all these. The exact parallels are not as clear. In *This Star of England* for example, the senior Ogburns noted:

King Lear more broadly than any other of Shakespeare's dramas is a synthesis of history, emotionally vivified personal experience, and philosophy, fused in the depths of the poet's creative imagination, and expressed in the strange medley of fact and symbolism which is peculiar to dreams (1137).

One example of this "strange medley of fact and symbolism" is the complete absence of a Queen *Lear*. This anomaly, like the questions surrounding the Fool, has been commented on in Shakespearean scholarship for centuries. In the 19th century there was even a play called *King Lear's Wife* which attempted to offer an explanation. It has always struck me that an answer may also be found in the pre-Christian era setting of the play, since one way to look at the question of the missing Queen (and the psychological complexities of the play) is to see *Lear* as both husband and father to his daughters, i.e. incest, a practice more accepted in cultures outside Christianity. In such a household who needs a Queen? But that issue is a big problem in any discussions of *Lear*, since no one wants to hear about it in either authorship camp (Stratfordian or anti-Stratfordian) given what it may be hinting about the author.

Yet such complexities have been discussed in mainstream scholarship, such as Mark Taylor's *Shakespeare's Darker Purpose*. In one interesting observation about *Lear* and his daughter Cordelia, he writes:

At the beginning of *King Lear* Daddy's little girl is leaving home, and though he must accept that development, he cannot. ... He wants his candidates for his son-in-law [Burgundy and the King of France] to know that he is keeping what he is giving them. ... [So] *Lear* introduces his plan to divide the kingdom with the words, "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose" (76).

In other words, Taylor argues, the "divide the kingdom" ploy is just *Lear*'s way to get his daughter trapped into doing what he knows she will do (defy him), thus giving him an excuse to disinherit her and deprive her of marriage to another. Of course, this does get deep into the weeds in terms of what's going on with *Lear* and Cordelia (and, for that matter, perhaps, with the author Shakespeare and his life). Mainstream thinkers of all stripes generally do not want to go there, yet *Lear* and Cordelia truly represent the essence of the play. Their respective actions in Act I are the predicate for all that follows.

Staying with Cordelia for a moment, let's examine what Anthony Hopkins had to say in several of the interviews he did for the *King Lear* press tour:

I think Lear is afraid of the feminine—in himself and in his daughters. I think he treated Cordelia like a tomboy, a chip off the old block, and when she rejects him, I think it releases something in him. He rampages through the rest of the play until he ends up on skid row.
(*The New York Times*, Sept. 26, 2018)

In an interview on *Amanpour & Co.* (PBS, Sept. 28, 2018), he adds this commentary on Lear:

He only loves one creature, and that's his daughter Cordelia, who, I believe, in childbirth, my wife, who was killed in childbirth, gave birth to her, so I treated her like a boy, gave her a sword and bow and arrow and fought with her so she was like a boy to me.

In both instances Hopkins is talking about how he, as an actor, needs to have some back story in mind to help him develop his performance. But without any story at all to draw on from Stratfordians, anything goes. This whole notion of Cordelia's mother dying in childbirth is simply made up. Yet his comments reveal that he knows there must have been a significant history out of which Shakespeare's *King Lear*—and its key relationship of father and daughter—grew. The question then arises, just how far apart are Hopkins' musings and Mark Taylor's analysis? I'd say, not much.

These complexities and contradictions are why we keep returning to Shakespeare's plays over and over again. For those interested in the authorship, especially Oxfordians, the *King Lear* story is, as the Ogburns noted, "a synthesis of history [and] emotionally vivified personal experience." It is, as they also note, most like a dream, which means that while analysis must be done, getting at what is really taking place is not easy. Yet, like a dream, the story certainly didn't come from nowhere, and it most certainly must have meant something to the author, just like any dream any of us ever had is uniquely ours and not someone else's.

I had long wondered how a three-hour play can be produced in just under two hours. Interestingly, there is an earlier example of a severely edited production of *King Lear*. In 1953 Orson Welles starred in a 73-minute television version of the play that was broadcast live on *Omnibus* (and available on DVD as *Omnibus: King Lear*). A look at this production, directed by Peter Brook and Andrew McCullough, demonstrated there is an interesting way to do it, one I thought was superior to what Eyre has attempted in his production. What Brook and McCullough did was to eliminate almost entirely the

secondary plot involving Gloucester and his sons and concentrate all their power on Lear and his three daughters. The Fool remains prominent and central. What I saw was that you could tell one story more fully and accurately rather than two stories in summary and less clearly.

In the end this latest movie version of *King Lear* simply lacked the true spirit of Shakespeare.

