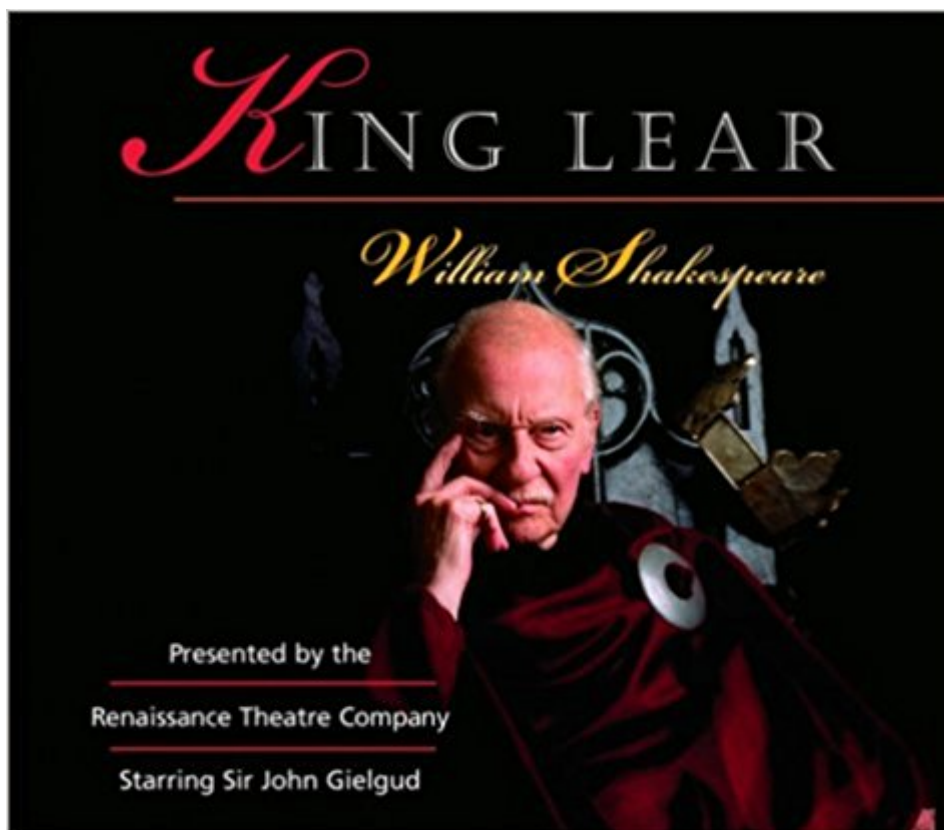


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King Lear: BBC Dramatization (BBC Radio Presents)



Synopsis

A king foolishly divides his kingdom between his scheming two oldest daughters and estranges himself from the daughter who loves him. So begins this profoundly moving and disturbing tragedy that, perhaps more than any other work in literature, challenges the notion of a coherent and just universe. The king and others pay dearly for their shortcomings—madness, murder, and the anguish of insight and forgiveness that arrive too late combine to make this an all-embracing tragedy of evil and suffering. Each Edition Includes:

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A king foolishly divides his kingdom between his scheming two oldest daughters and estranges himself from the daughter who loves him. So begins this profoundly moving and disturbing tragedy that, perhaps more than any other work in literature, challenges the notion of a coherent and just universe. The king and others pay dearly for their shortcomings--as madness, murder, and the anguish of insight and forgiveness that arrive too late combine to make this an all-embracing tragedy of evil and suffering. From the Paperback edition.

No comment on the play itself, of course. A very good dramatization of the classic play and with Sir Gielgud's interpretation. A must buy if you want to hear the play.

With John Gielgud, Kenneth Brannagh and Bob Hoskins my hopes were high for this. But somehow Gielgud lacks the anger and power of Olivier's 1983 version. Also, actors sitting at a table reading into microphones somehow miss the passion of an actual performance. Still, there are a lot worse versions out there.

One of the things you can assume when you write about Shakespeare--given the hundreds of thousands of pages that have already been written about him in countless books, essays, theses and term papers--is that whatever you say will have been said before, and then denounced, defended, revised and denounced again, ad infinitum. So I'm certain I'm not breaking any new ground here. King Lear, though many, including David Denby (see Orrin's review of Great Books) and Harold Bloom consider it the pinnacle of English Literature, has just never done much for me. I appreciate the power of the basic plot--an aging King divides his realm among his ungrateful children with disastrous results--which has resurfaced in works as varied as Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, A Thousand Acres (see Orrin's review), and Akira Kurosawa's last great film, Ran. But I've always found the play to be too busy, the characters to be too unsympathetic, the speeches to be unmemorable and the tragedy to be too shallow. By shallow, I mean that by the time we meet Lear he is already a petulant old man, we have to accept his greatness from the word of others. Then his first action in the play, the division of the kingdom, is so boneheaded and his

reaction to Cordelia so selfishly blind, that we're unwilling to credit their word. Then there's the fact that Shakespeare essentially uses the action of the play as a springboard for an examination of madness. The play was written during the period when Shakespeare was experimenting with obscure meanings anyway; add in the demented babble of several of the central characters, including Lear, and you've got a drama whose language is just about impossible to follow. Plus you've got seemingly random occurrences like the disappearance of the Fool and Edgar's pretending to help his father commit suicide. I am as enamored of the Bard as anyone, but it's just too much work for an author to ask of his audience trying to figure out what the heck they are all saying and what their actions are supposed to convey. So I long ago gave up trying to decipher the whole thing and I simply group it with the series of non-tragic tragedies (along with MacBeth, Hamlet, Julius Caesar), which I think taken together can be considered to make a unified political statement about the importance of the regular transfer of power in a state. Think about it for a moment; there's no real tragedy in what happens to Caesar, MacBeth, Hamlet or Lear; they've all proven themselves unfit for rule. Nor are the fates of those who usurp power from Caesar, Hamlet and Lear at all tragic, with the possible exception of Brutus, they pretty much get what they have coming to them. Instead, the real tragedy lies in the bloody chain of events that each illegitimate claiming of power unleashes. The implied message of these works, when considered as a unified whole, is that deviance from the orderly transfer of power leads to disaster for all concerned. (Of particular significance to this analysis in regards to King Lear is the fact that it was written in 1605, the year of the Gunpowder Plot.) In fact, looking at Lear from this perspective offers some potential insight into several aspects of the play that have always bothered me. For instance, take the rapidity with which Lear slides into insanity. This transition has never made much sense to me. But now suppose that Lear is insane before the action of the play begins and that the clearest expression of his loss of reason is his decision to shatter his own kingdom. Seen in this light, there is no precipitous decline into madness; the very act of splitting up the central authority of his throne, of transferring power improperly, is shown to be a sign of craziness. Next, consider the significance of Edgar's pretense of insanity and of Lear's genuine dementia. What is the possible meaning of their wanderings and their reduction to the status of common fools, stripped of luxury and station? And what does it tell us that it is after they are so reduced that Lear's reason (i.e. his fitness to rule) is restored and that Edgar ultimately takes the throne. It is probably too much to impute this meaning to Shakespeare, but the text will certainly bear the interpretation that they are made fit to rule by gaining an understanding of the lives of common folk. This is too democratic a reading for the time, but I like it, and it is emblematic of Shakespeare's genius that his plays will withstand even such

idiosyncratic interpretations. To me, the real saving grace of the play lies not in the portrayal of the fathers, Lear and Gloucester, nor of the daughters, but rather in that of the sons. First, Edmund, who ranks with Richard III and Iago in sheer joyous malevolence. Second, Edgar, whose ultimate ascent to the throne makes all that has gone before worthwhile. He strikes me as one of the truly heroic characters in all of Shakespeare, as exemplified by his loyalty to his father and to the King. I've said I don't consider the play to be particularly tragic; in good part this is because it seems the nation is better off with Edgar on the throne than with Lear or one of his vile daughters. Even a disappointing, and often bewildering, tragedy by Shakespeare is better than the best of many other authors (though I'd not say the same of his comedies.) So of course I recommend it, but I don't think as highly of it as do many of the critics. GRADE : B-

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