King Lear
by William Shakespeare.
A Granada TV production with Laurence Olivier, John Hurt, Diana Rigg, and others, televised in the United States in February 1984.

WHAT MAKES Laurence Olivier such a continued inspiration to those of us who have venerated him as his stature—his nobility. Most great actors would have retired under the pressures of debilitating illness, but Olivier only began to slow down a couple of years ago. (He is seventy-six.) Through the 1970s, he gave a series of wonderful supporting performances in movies like Three Sisters, Marathon Man, The Seven-Per-Cent Solution and Dracula, while maintaining his occasional tours de force: Skylock or Doc in Come Back, Little Sheba—for the television cameras. And at seventy-four he chose, rather than settling for the usual fare of old age (the old, non-strenuous comeback role or a new career in self-parody), to play King Lear in a television production that finally received an American airing early this year.

Because of the moments he has selected for attacking each of the great Shakespearean roles—at least, the ones he has preserved on film or video—Olivier always gives the impression that he has grown into them. He did Henry V and Hamlet while he was still young enough to play romantic heroes, Richard III as he approached fifty, Othello when he had both the strength and maturity for this most physically demanding of the tragic protagonists, Skylock in his sixties. Very few actors actually wait until their seventies to attempt Lear, because who besides Olivier could bring it off so late in life? And so, because it is normally a part enacted by strong middle-aged men, Lear is customarily depicted as powerful, tyrannical, a dragon whose wrath terrifies everyone around him, and whose vicious curses rend the air and shivelf the hearers. But Shakespeare wrote a play about willful, childish old men (Lear and Gloucester) whose far more potent daughters and sons dominate and trick and abuse them, who are reduced to curses and tears when their children are no longer feasible. Confronted with a pair of daughters who refuse to let him have his way, Lear cries, "I will do such things—What are they, yet I know not, and Olivier takes that line as the center of his performance. His Lear is a feeble old man whose tragedy is not the fall from power but the descent into madness which he struggles in vain to stave off.

If Olivier’s frailty places certain constraints on the interpretation—notably in the heath scene, which in any case goes away because the director, Michael Elliott, practically drowns out the verse with laudanum-inspired lighting—the benefits far outweigh the losses. Suddenly the opening scene, a terror to actors and directors, becomes a human drama rather than the weird, ritualistic exhibition it usually appears. Then her is no daughter of his—and then he is too obstinate to revoke words said in haste. Played this way, the first scene of King Lear draws us in emotionally as it has in few productions: Lear no longer seems an inscrutable monster whose behavior is dictated by a grand theatrical whim, but "a very foolish fond old man" who makes a childish error the implications of which he cannot guess at. It also tests the actress cast as Cordelia severely; when Lear’s longing for the pleasure of his daughters’ protests of love is so transparent, we may well ask why she so stubbornly holds out. As Anna Calder-Marshall plays her, she is Cordelia and Regan involved with her own turmoil, the outside, tender within. To Calder-Marshall’s credit, she allows Cordelia to grow more comprehensible (and more sympathetic) as the play unfolds. I couldn’t fault her performance, as Dorothy Tutin’s Cordelia (though the actress has a couple of strong scenes in the final hour), but Diana Rigg, as Regan, does some marvellous, unexpected things in her scenes with Olivier.

This Regan babies her father, and he loves every minute, though we may be disturbed by what we see—by how carefully she controls the situation, and by the unmistakable sexual component in the kind of control she wields. (As Rigg plays her, Regan is a study in sexual power and hypocrisy.) Nowhere is Lear more blind than in his trusting Regan: when she becomes a stern nursemaid, forbidding him a home with his hundred knights, he doesn’t recognize her—he doesn’t understand that she has just shown her hand for the first time. Rigg reads her lines to Olivier in a put-on sing-song nursery voice; when she turns on him ("I pray you, father, being weak, seem so"); she simply changes the music.

Olivier plays Lear’s shifts in mood, his contradictions, as evidence either of an approaching second childhood or of a determination not to go mad—a determination that requires all his physical and emotional strength, and then of course gives way because he can’t summon up all the strength he needs. When Lear feels Goneril and her servants are mistreating him, he waffles at first, fearful of learning that she division of the kingdom and the rejection of Cordelia were dreadful mistakes. When he arrives at Gloucester’s castle, where Regan and her husband Cornwall are guests, and they fail to meet him, he thinks up excuses for them. Olivier identifies Lear’s desperate, weakening grasp on his sanity by having him stumble to his knees to plead, begging, "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet O, let me not be mad." And in the scene of his curse on his daughters and has to be led away by his Fool (John Hurt), Olivier’s meticulously crafted through-line allows us to recognize exactly what has occurred: an old man, over every effort to hang on, has lost his mind.

The mad scene, in which Lear decks himself with flowers and recites doggerel with a curious, interior punctuation to it, is clearly inspired Olivier to search for a new style. I’ve never seen anything like the way he plays this scene; it’s as though he dug inside himself and found a whole new actor. This Lear’s insanity is astonishingly serene.

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