

## TWO *LEAR*S FOR TELEVISION: AN EXPLORATION OF TELEVISUAL STRATEGIES

The fifth season of *The Shakespeare Plays* opened in America on October 18, 1982, with the last play that Jonathan Miller directed for the series. The result is a provocative version of *King Lear* that marked the third time that Miller had cast Michael Hordern in the role of the foolish, old king.[1] Fifteen months later, on January 26, 1984, Americans finally got to see the much heralded *Laurence Olivier's KING LEAR*. This version, taped earlier in England for Granada Television, was directed by Michael Elliott and produced by David Plowright. These two productions of the play differ radically, each with instructive strengths and weaknesses. Having these two recent productions of the same play to compare and contrast provides us with a valuable opportunity to examine some of the choices that the directors of each production made in “translating” *King Lear* to television.

The acting styles in these two *Lears* differ in many significant ways. Michael Elliott conceived of his *Lear* as existing in a mythic world with characters who appear somewhat larger than life. Naturally following from this is his emphasis on individual performances. There is little doubt that the casting of Olivier in the title role of what was officially billed as *Laurence Olivier's KING LEAR* was the principal reason for the production, but Olivier had a splendid cast to back him up, and the members of that cast turned in some memorable, indeed unforgettable, performances. The *mise en scene* and editing of this production call attention to these individual performances with a preponderance of closely framed one-shots and rapid cutting – the effects of which are to accentuate the faces of the actors and the slightest nuances of expression that flicker across them. However, I intend to consider in a moment what this strategy denies us on television.

In Jonathan Miller's production, the emphasis is exactly the opposite. Miller's actors perform in ensemble, consistent with his view of the play that the family is a metaphor for the state. Michael Hordern graciously defers to the other members of the cast who all give subdued performances consistent with many of Miller's beliefs about how Shakespeare should be acted for television. Miller uses a relatively static camera which records fairly long takes of the actors generally in medium two-shots, three-shots, and four-shots, as opposed to Elliott's shorter takes and dominating one-shots.

Both of these productions of *King Lear* last approximately three hours. However, because each makes different aesthetic assumptions about the play, each reveals much about the possibilities available for producing Shakespeare for television. Jonathan Miller's version is faster paced than Elliott's. This pace is established in several ways—through transitions between scenes, the illusion of cross-cutting, the deletion of one scene, and the shortening of others. The pace of Elliott's *Lear* is slower because Elliott chose, as shall be analyzed further, to take a more “cinematic” and less “televisual” approach in his production. Elliott, like Miller, gives the impression of cross-cutting between act two, scene four and act three, scenes two, three, four, five, and six, but Elliott cuts more of the text. Three complete scenes are excised—III.i, IV.iii, and IV.iv (as opposed to Miller's one—IV.iii) and some speeches and scenes are noticeably shortened. As a result, Elliott had additional screen time that enabled him to create new scenes which emphasize visual elements over verbal ones.

These new scenes call attention to the lavishness of his production. Act one, scene two opens with Edmund's soliloquy on the now deserted Stonehenge set. After it, Gloucester enters, and the two discuss the letter supposedly from Edgar. Rather than continuing the scene as the text does, Elliott then creates a new scene at the stables of Gloucester's castle. Edgar rides in on a

horse, followed by Edmund, also riding. After they dismount, the textual scene continues. A similar expansion happens at the end of act one, scene five. After Lear and his retinue leave Albany's castle, a brief new scene, without dialogue, is added in which Lear and the Fool on the lead horse are followed by Lear's train. This expansion sets up another one that opens act two, scene four when, still on horseback, Lear and his men ride through the heath. The first few lines are delivered, and then a new scene begins after they enter the gates of Gloucester's compound. The most noticeable expansion occurs in act four, scene six. After Gloucester vows to "bear affliction," he and Edgar walk off in a dissolve to Lear washing his rags in a stream. Lear snares a rabbit, opens it with a knife, eats its entrails, and drinks from the stream. There is a cut to Lear making and wearing chains of wild flowers before he says, "No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the king himself." Lear recites a few more lines and then sings a song that is not in the text. Only then does he run into Gloucester and Edgar, the dialogue of the scene continuing with Edgar's "Sweet marjoram." These changes reveal Elliott's more "cinematic" approach to the play, as he creates visual equivalents to the spoken word. We know from the text that Lear has gone mad—in Elliott's version we *see* much more of the madness that we would normally *hear* more about; consequently, Elliott has no need for IV.iv in which Cordelia discusses her father's condition with the Doctor, so he deletes it.

Much more than Miller, then, Elliott seems to employ a more "cinematic" and less "televisual" approach to his production. His directorial choices emphasize editing and visual equivalents as opposed to techniques that allow Shakespeare's language to carry a greater weight than is usual in cinematic versions of the plays. Since this distinction mimics a controversy that dominated film theory and film production from the onset up to the theoretical revolution of the mid-1960s, to obtain further insights into these two approaches, it will be useful to examine some of the theories of Andre Bazin who in the 1950s distinguished between directors "who put their faith in the image and those who put their faith in reality" (24). Bazin sets the techniques of *montage* against those of *depth-of-field*. He first differentiates between two orders of montage: (1) images joined according to some abstract principle (a technique associated primarily with the silent cinema) and (2) images joined according to psychological montage whereby an event is broken down into those fragments which resemble the changes of attention we might naturally experience were we physically present at the event (a technique associated with the coming of sound). In opposition to these, Bazin sets the depth-of-field techniques which permit an action to develop over a long time on several spatial planes, constructing dramatic interrelationships *within* the frame rather than *between* frames (cf. Andrew Major *Film Theories* 156-157). Although contemporary theoreticians convincingly call into question the use of the term "realism" by Bazin and others (Andrew *Concepts in Film Theory* 48), much of what Bazin has to say about depth-of-field techniques relates to the distinction that I am making between "cinematic" versus "televisual" approaches to Shakespeare on television.

Bazin explains that with depth-of-field techniques dramatic effects which had formerly relied on montage can be created out of the movements of actors within a fixed framework where whole scenes are covered in one take with the camera remaining motionless (33). With this approach, montage is partially replaced by frequent panning shots and entrances, based on "a respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, of its duration" (34). From Bazin's theories, we may conveniently label those *televisual* strategies that are similar to Elliott's as the *montage technique* and those that are similar to Miller's as the *depth-of-field technique*. These two techniques rarely appear in unadulterated forms, yet they do describe the two major approaches that have been employed to present Shakespeare's plays on television.

As I have just asserted, Elliott's *mise en scene* and editing have more affinities with cinema than Miller's. Elliott's style emphasizes individuals. He cuts frequently, and his short takes are dominated by tightly framed one-shots and a moving camera. As mentioned, the result does showcase many unforgettable performances, but to me these strategies do not make the best aesthetic use of the medium for presenting Shakespeare's plays. Television inherently creates an intimacy between the viewer and the actors—the subtleties of individual performances are generally evident. Thus, aesthetic choices that call further attention to the individual performances can become obtrusive. Two critics have stated similar positions. Jacqueline Pearson, writing about the first three plays in the BBC series, makes an observation that applies to all televised Shakespeare: "Television's use of the close-up enforces an intimacy with individual characters which Shakespeare does not always choose to give us, and thus insists that everything in the play except individual emotions is dispensable [sic]" (69). Martin Banham goes even further:

When a television (or, to be fair, a film) director cuts to a character, or comes into a close-up, or otherwise shapes our images what of one action, he is intruding his own interpretation of is significant between the action and the spectator. In so doing not only does he interfere with our imaginative liberties, he also runs the risk of destroying the sensitive integral framework of the play itself. (33)

The point is that productions of Shakespeare on television require different strategies than productions of Shakespeare on film because of the different dynamics of the two media.

In Elliott's version, there is a great deal of camera movement. Typically, Elliott will have his camera set up a medium or close-shot, and then he will move his camera in to tighten that shot further, accentuating the individual emotion displayed by the actor. Although I believe that it should not be condemned outright, this technique is overused in Elliott's production, denying us the simultaneous reactions of the other characters on the set. A related problem results from Elliott's over reliance on one-shots, interrupting the flow of the speeches with too many reaction shots.

There are, however, moments that transcend the limitations of the cuts, zoom-ins, and short takes that mar Elliott's production which is at its best when his camera is not darting about and the emphasis is on more than one character in the frame at a time, such as in IV.vi. In this scene, there are moments when Lear displays his madness to Gloucester that, though very tightly framed, work well because we are able to see clearly the two actors interacting with each other (ll. 96-187). Earlier in the same scene, Elliott has Gloucester suspect Edgar's identity in a moving moment: when Edgar says, "Give me your hand. / I'll lead you to some biding," he grasps one of Gloucester's hands, and Gloucester pats his shoulder, saying "Hearty thanks" and continuing "the bounty and benison of heaven" while stroking Edgar's face. As he pauses and stumbles over ". . . be . . . be thine," Edgar removes Gloucester's hand. Then, as Gloucester leans forward, Edgar leans back and grabs Gloucester outstretched hand to try to forestall a recognition by touch. This non-textual but fully appropriate exchange of gestures once again demonstrates the effectiveness of ensemble composition, for we are permitted to see close up and simultaneously two fine actors in a well-conceived interaction.

Although one may certainly disagree with the ideas that Jonathan Miller imposes upon his version of *King Lear* for the BBC series, he does use the medium of television effectively to get those ideas across. Miller seems to be more concerned with capturing the low-keyed acting and delivery of his actors than he is in calling attention to individual performances. Instead of

constantly moving his camera or cutting as Elliott does, Miller chooses to move his actors. Except for occasionally moving his camera in or back to reframe his shots, Miller is content to leave his camera largely static, recording many characters in the frame at a time, usually in medium-shots. Compared to Elliott, Miller cuts far less and uses longer takes. Thus, because Miller has many characters in the frame, blocking is extremely important to him. His act one, scene one uses blocking in triangular patterns so effectively that the blocking becomes a visual essay on the shifting triangular relationships in that scene.

Because Miller uses his camera to frame the space that his actors move around in, when closeups do occur, they call attention to themselves in a particularly potent manner. Act one, scene four provides a good example of this. When Lear curses Goneril, calling her a “detested kite,” he is addressing her directly as she stands next to Albany and as the Fool looks on from behind Lear. When Lear says, “O, most small fault,” Miller cuts to a close one-shot of Lear and holds it until Lear says, “And thy dear judgment out”; then there is a cut back to the original four-shot. This strategy enables Miller to show more of the interaction and reactions of his characters than Elliott’s cutting between one-shots could ever provide. First, we simultaneously see the passion of Lear cursing Goneril and the reactions of Goneril, Albany, and the Fool to what is being said. Then with the closeup of Lear, we concentrate, if not meditate, on Lear’s recognition of his own folly.

This discussion of Elliott’s and Miller’s editing and *mise en scene* has already revealed a wide spectrum of paradigmatic choices available to the television director of a Shakespearean play. Elliott’s approach to televisual codes is that of the montage technique. By that I mean that he establishes interrelationships primarily by cuts between frames. Miller’s approach is that of the depth-of-field technique in that he establishes interrelationships within the frame. There are many accompanying differences between these two techniques. Elliott’s takes are short; Miller’s are long. Elliott frequently uses reaction shots; Miller uses them selectively. Concerning their choices about *mise en scene*, Elliott uses a highly fluid camera; Miller’s camera is largely static—he moves his actors within the frame; therefore, blocking is extremely important to him. Concerning framing, Elliott uses tightly framed one-shots; Miller uses looser, generally medium, ensemble shots.

To carry this analysis one step further, I would contend that Miller’s televisual approach is ultimately more effective for realizing Shakespeare on television than is Elliott’s, which depends more upon cutting and visual equivalents. I am not arguing that Elliott’s televisual approach is alien to television as a whole, or that his choices of rhetorical and theatrical codes are any less valid than Miller’s. Nor am I denying that each director makes choices about *mise en scene* and editing that, to varying degrees, control what we see on the screen. What I am asserting is that realizing *Shakespeare* for television alters the dynamics of television as a cinematic subgenre because the density of Shakespeare’s language must of necessity be sacrificed in more “cinematic,” montage approaches. In a highly visual medium like film, images can often be in competition with Shakespeare’s language. Roger Manvell notes that “there can be little doubt that the full-scale spoken poetry of Shakespeare’s stage and the continuous visual imagery of the cinema can be oil and water” (15; cf. 107). Charles Marowitz, an assistant to Peter Brook during the filming of Brook’s 1970 *King Lear*, makes a similar observation:

When we came to consider how the words should actually be treated on the screen, we realised that the power of Shakespeare’s writing -- particularly its evocative power—is so enormous that although one can find images which may seem appropriate, images become

unnecessary or even unwanted—they can actually get between the audience and the power of the words. (Qtd. in Manvell 138)

Because of the differences in image quality and the relation of the audience to the screen, in television the spoken word carries more weight than it does in the cinema. This is an especially important difference when dealing with a Shakespeare play in which language is paramount. As Sheldon P. Zitner points out, “Since its spoken words loom larger in the total sensory input, television can go further than film towards restoring the Elizabethan theatre’s primacy of words” (6). Therefore, my contention is not that Miller’s televisual approach is more “realistic” than Elliott’s but that it better establishes a relationship between the spectator and the object on the television screen, replicating an experience with Shakespeare’s plays that is similar to the theatrical one. To demonstrate this contention, I now propose to examine Elliott’s and Miller’s televisual choices in act one, scene one of their versions of the play.

Elliott opens his *King Lear* with ominous background music. The first shot, which establishes the scene, is a high-angle, long-shot of the enormous Stonehenge-like set as the sun rises behind it in the mists of the morning. Characters are seen moving to the inside of the circle of stones as the camera cranes down. It continues moving to set up a two-shot of Gloucester and Kent on the outside perimeter of the stone circle. As Kent begins speaking, the camera continues to move in to frame a much tighter two-shot. At Kent’s “Is not this your son, my lord,” Elliott cuts abruptly to a three-shot that now includes Edmund, viewed from the back. As Gloucester says, “His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge,” there is another abrupt cut to a closely framed reaction shot of Edmund in which we see a slight raising of his left eyelid in response to his father’s statement. This shot is held during Kent’s “I cannot conceive you,” at which time Elliott cuts back to the two-shot of Kent and Gloucester. After Gloucester’s “. . . ere she had a husband for her bed,” we are given another very quick reaction shot of Edmund before returning to the three-shot. At Gloucester’s “But I have a son, by order of law . . .” Elliott returns to the two-shot of Kent and Gloucester. When Gloucester says “. . . who yet is no dearer,” Elliott has Gloucester move toward Edmund with the camera following in a pan that sets up a two-shot of Gloucester and Edmund. Gloucester moves back to reform the two-shot with Kent and says, “Though this knave came somewhat saucily to the world before he was sent for.” At “there was good sport at his making,” the camera tightens the two-shot; then Elliott cuts back to the three-shot and continues with it until Edmund’s “My services to your lordship,” which is delivered in a close one-shot. Next, there is a cut back to the three-shot for Kent’s response, a cut to a one-shot of Edmund’s reply, and then a return to the three-shot. After Gloucester’s “He hath been out nine years,” Elliott cuts to a reaction of Edmund at “and away he shall again” and then cuts back to the three-shot for “The King is coming.” At this point, Kent and Gloucester turn to enter the circle of stones as Gloucester signals to Edmund not to follow.

What I have just described takes less than a minute and a half of screen time. In that time, Elliott cuts thirteen times, with some of the takes (especially Edmund’s reactions) lasting only a second or two. In many respects, this opening is a perfect example of the montage strategy. Rather than showing the reactions of the characters within the frame, Elliott presents them to us in reaction shots through cuts between the frames. The cuts isolate individual performances in these reaction shots, such as the one featuring Edmund’s raised eyelid; further, they replicate psychological changes in attention. However, they are completely under the control of the director. They give

spectators little choice about where to direct their attention. This to me is a major shortcoming of using the montage technique for presenting Shakespeare on television.

Miller's version of these same opening lines also takes about a minute and a half, but there is not a single cut during that time. Miller opens his scene with a long-shot of the darkly lit, relatively artificial interior of Lear's palace. Kent and Gloucester enter the set from the extreme right and walk to the front and center of the frame. Even before Kent begins to speak, Edmund, who had been sitting with several other courtiers on a bench to the right, rises and walks into the mid-field between the two Earls, creating the first of innumerable triangular blocking patterns in this scene. Edmund's body language suggests that he is trying to overhear what the two Earls are saying. Kent and Gloucester speak in hushed voices as if they do not wish to be overheard by the others present in the room. Kent looks over his shoulder, and Edmund's attitude implies that he is attempting to act casually, hiding his real purpose. The exchange between Kent and Gloucester continues, and Kent once again looks over his shoulder and asks, "Is not this your son, my lord?" Edmund's and Kent's eyes meet. As Gloucester responds, Edmund moves behind his father to the right, establishing another triangular pattern. Sometimes, this movement is only the slight turn of the body or the head. Gloucester, for example, in the middle of this threesome, directs his remarks to Kent and then turns to look at Edmund's reactions. When Gloucester announces, "The King is coming," the three move out of the way to let Lear enter from the right front. Rather than cutting, Miller has his actors move *\*within the frame\**: we see all three all the time.

As we can see, Miller directs this same portion of scene one quite differently from the way Elliott does. Miller establishes relationships within the frame rather than between frames. We still have the reactions of Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund to what is being discussed, but we have choice about how we wish to direct our attention during these interactions. With this strategy, the emphasis is less upon individual performances and more upon the interrelationships among the characters. This is just what the montage strategy denies us.

Obviously, I cannot continue this same close analysis throughout the entire scene, but there are a few other points that I want to make about the differences between these two versions before drawing some conclusions. After Gloucester and Kent enter the stone circle, Elliott continues the scene at a leisurely pace with music and the ceremonial entrances of Goneril and Albany, of Regan and Cornwall, and of Lear and Cordelia. After these entrances, Elliott moves in for a close one-shot of Lear, then to an overhead shot of the interior of the circle, then to another quick one-shot of Lear, then to another overhead shot, and then to a shot of Lear on his throne. These cuts, at times, create the impression of a slide show; they are obtrusive and are not, in my view, as seamless as they should be. Throughout this production, Elliott cuts between frames to establish relationships. When Lear explains his intention of dividing his kingdom and retiring from active rule of it, Elliott cuts between one-shots of Lear and two-shots of Regan and Cornwall and of Goneril and Albany and one-shots of Cordelia. This montage strategy denies us the simultaneous impact of Shakespeare's language upon all the major characters in the frame (their collective reactions to what is happening) and our decision about where to direct our attention during those interactions.

The depth-of-field technique allows viewers to exercise more control over what they see. In this approach, blocking within the ensemble shots is extremely important, as it is in the theatre. Earlier, I mentioned that Miller's blocking in this scene is a visual essay on the shifting relationships among the characters, and it is appropriate now to consider some of these triangles and their effects.

The first triangular pattern, after Lear enters the frame, occurs when Lear in the center of the foreground examines the map, while in deep-field to the left are Regan and Cornwall and to the right are Goneril and Albany. After Lear's "while we / Unburden'd crawl toward death," Miller makes his first cut to a close one-shot of Lear. The camera then dollies back setting up another triangle: the elder sisters and their spouses remain in deep-field in the same positions as the last triangle; at the apex of this new triangle in the center foreground is Cordelia; Lear sits on his throne slightly in front of Goneril and Regan and almost in the middle of the three points. Goneril declares her love for her father to the right of a triangle formed by Cornwall, Albany, and Lear. Cordelia's reaction to her eldest sister's remarks is addressed to the Fool in another triangle: the Fool to the left in the foreground, Cordelia to the right, with Lear at the apex in deep-field. Regan declares her love in a triangle composed of herself, Cornwall, and Lear, and Cordelia's reaction is presented in the same pattern as before. When Lear asks Cordelia "what can you say," Goneril and Regan are together at the apex of a triangle with Lear and Cordelia on either side in the foreground. As Cordelia explains her reply of "Nothing," Kent moves into the apex, replacing Goneril and Regan. As Lear's anger increases, he steps to the right and blocks out Kent. As Kent bids good-bye, he does so in another triangular pattern: Lear is at the apex in deep-field; Cordelia and the Fool are together at the left foreground while Kent is at the right. When Burgundy and France enter, they too form a triangle with Lear at the apex. The camera then dollies and pans to set up a triangle with the Fool and Cordelia at the apex and Burgundy and Lear at the other points in the foreground. When Cordelia pleads, "I yet beseech your Majesty," she does so in a triangle composed of herself, Lear, and France. During France's "My Lord of Burgundy," France, Cordelia, and Burgundy are blocked in yet another triangular pattern, while a triangle during France's "Fairest Cordelia" is composed of France, Lear, and Cordelia. When Cordelia bids her sisters farewell, they form another triangle, and the scene concludes, with a triangle formed by Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. Most of these triangles are created within the frame primarily by the movement of the actors with some movement of the camera.

As is evident, Miller's blocking replicates the shifting relationships among the characters in this scene. It also enables viewers to shift their attention among those characters as they desire. Miller's directing places his characters in the dramatic space that we observe, and in that respect it controls emphasis as a director in the theatre does. However, with this technique, we have more freedom about where we wish to direct our attention than we do with the montage technique, and this strategy restores to Shakespeare's language the primacy that it loses with the montage technique.

I am not contending that Miller's *King Lear* is definitive or for that matter that it is the only way that *King Lear* can or should be produced for television. I am instead arguing that Miller uses televisual strategies more effectively than Elliott. My analysis does not preclude that Shakespeare can be conceived and recorded for television using the cinematic technique of montage. I am asserting, however, that Elliott does not use his montage as effectively as he could have and that there are elements that the montage technique itself denies us as viewers. Does this mean that the Granada Television *Laurence Olivier KING LEAR* is a failure? Certainly not. Olivier's performance and those of many of the other members of his cast are unforgettable and are among its strongest assets. We as viewers *deserve* the opportunity to see Olivier and this cast performing together and should be grateful that television can provide us that opportunity, but we should also be aware of what we are missing in a production that is directed using montage techniques.

Because television is highly mediated, the director must exert some control over what the viewer sees; the issue is how much control and what strategies are most effective. One consequence of Elliott's tight framing is the virtual elimination of the decor. Miller's looser, medium-shots seem better suited to establish a more theatrical point of balance between the spectator and the television screen, and, therefore, a greater participation by the spectator. Further, Miller's strategies rely more upon Shakespeare's text, despite the ideas imposed upon it, than Elliott's do. Because of these directorial choices, Miller's version creates a televisual analogue to the theatrical experience—one in which Shakespeare's language is not sacrificed to the images. Montage can create competition between the visual and the verbal elements in a production. Those who direct Shakespeare's plays for cinema generally accept this and substitute visual equivalents, paring down the verbal texts. In fact, theatrical versions of Shakespeare's plays in cinema, such as the Stuart Burge's *Othello* with Laurence Olivier, do not work well for the very reason that the visuals are uninteresting. This does not mean that one cannot have a satisfying experience with a filmed version of a Shakespeare play. Quite the contrary, many Shakespeare films are true to the spirit of the plays from which they were derived, but the importance of Shakespeare's language alters the dynamics of television as a cinematic subgenre. Therefore, a more "cinematic" approach to Shakespeare on television is not as effective a use of the medium as the depth-of-field technique.

Miller's televisual strategies enable viewers to watch Shakespeare on television in a manner that is similar to the theatrical experience. As H. R. Coursen notes, "The best TV productions gradually erase our concentration on technique and draw us into that attentiveness similar to what happens to us in the theater" (127). This, I contend, is what Jonathan Miller's production of *King Lear* does and what Michael Elliott's does not do. Miller's style accomplishes this through a greater, uninterrupted, continuity of dramatic space and time; a more active relationship between the spectator and the object; more personal choice about where and how to direct one's attention; and a greater weight given to the spoken word.

## NOTES

[1] Production credit was given to Shaun Sutton, however, who took over the reins of series producer from Miller.

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