Richard Eyre's *King Lear*: A Brexit Allegory (first shown on BBC2, 9.30pm on 28 May 2018)

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Edward St Aubyn's spin-off of the *King Lear* story, *Dunbar*, was published in 2017.[1] In the novel, Henry Dunbar is a media mogul characterised by a dark mixture of sinister clout and puerile crassness like several real-life public figures in the worlds of business and politics. His two elder daughters put him, against his will, in a residential care home while they plot to take over the majority shares of his business empire. It is a shrewd and comic adaptation, enhanced by a knowledge of the source, and deepened by its resonance with Shakespeare's play.

Richard Eyre's adaptation (the production credits describe the film as 'Adapted and Directed by' him), is mostly Shakespeare's text transposed to the same high-end setting as *Dunbar* (see Figure 1). The process of adaptation, reducing the play to a duration of 115 minutes, involved Eyre in several different stages:

[1] Edward St Aubyn, *Dunbar* (London: Hogarth Shakespeare, 2017). I am extremely grateful to Sir Richard Eyre for his assistance with this review article. He provided me with three documents referred to in the text as follows: 'The Look of *Lear*' (hereafter 'Look') about the settings, shooting style and colour of the film; 'Director's Notes' ('Notes') written for the BBC about the project and 'Email answers to specific questions' ('Email') which I sent him. All of these documents were sent to me on 2 August 2018. Ben Haworth, Lois Potter and Boika Sokolova offered much appreciated suggestions. I am also grateful to Noelette Buckley and Sharon Moran who provided the images.

I started cutting parts that I've always found laboured – the Edgar sub-plot, Poor Tom's excesses, the *longueurs* of Lear's mad scene. I cut all speeches where a character is giving information […]. I cut all lines which were not comprehensible without reference to footnotes. Then I looked at all scenes to examine the bones of the narrative and trim to essential story. Finally I acted as Shakespeare's editor and looked within each speech (here's the heretical bit) to see if there were repetitions and 'excesses' of metaphor – i.e. reduce 4 metaphors to 3. I made some dialogue cuts during film editing at the stage where each film – whatever its provenance – becomes just a film subject to its own expedient rules. ('Email')

Figure 1: Cordelia (Florence Pugh), Lear (Anthony Hopkins), Regan (Emily Watson) and Goneril (Emma Thompson)

The opening credits soar over night-time London, the Shard, the Walkie-Talkie and Gherkin, illuminated by the lights of offices, peopled by the hedge-fund managers and bankers whose after-hours deals make London both a city of immense energy as well as a place of obscene inequality. As the disenfranchised Lear (Anthony Hopkins) ponders his heretofore happily insulated life, he wanders through a Calais-like refugee camp in the rain with sagging tents and tatty, improvised shelters: 'Poor naked wretches […] O I have ta'en/ Too little care of this' (3.4.28–33). Their hovel is a shipping container which seems luxurious by comparison (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Edgar (Andrew Scott), Kent (Jim Carter), Lear (Anthony Hopkins) and Fool (Karl Johnson)

The sequence is an explicit attack on the complacency of the English establishment and it is worth pointing out that this production first aired only nine days after a royal wedding costing a sickening £32m (including a cake which is supposed to have cost £50,000) in a period which has seen the financial destruction of public services, especially the NHS. As Lear struggles to make sense of his surroundings, waking uncertainly in a

military hospital with the doctor, Kent and Cordelia in attendance, he seems newly attuned to the manner in which his humanity is shared with those in the Jungle camp: 'I should ev'n die with pity/ To see another thus' (4.6.50–1). But a little month after this production first aired, *The Guardian* (28 June 2018) reported that child homelessness has increased in the UK by 80% since 2011. On the same day it featured a story about the major refurbishment taking place at Buckingham Palace at the cost of £369m. What Eyre's film asked for, and in general succeeded in delivering, was the sense that the post-heath Lear truly understands human loss – material as much as emotional or familial. Eyre insists on the modernity of the play's urgency: 'there's nothing in the action that couldn't occur today' ('Look') and 'I wanted to touch contemporary references, look for contemporary parallels' ('Email').

This adaptation directly addresses Brexit Britain perched, like Gloucester on a cliff top, on the brink of imminent ruin (see Figure 3). Poor Tom's clothing was a girl's blue party frock, spattered with mud. For the current UK government, the party is very much over and in spite of Teresa May's claim to be funding the NHS on its 70th birthday with the Brexit dividend (that is the monies saved from the UK's future non-payment of its EU membership subscriptions), she is conveniently ignoring what economists (including the Government's own Office for Budget Responsibility as well as major companies such as BMW and Airbus) forecast will be, following Brexit, a slump in UK living standards. This *King Lear* speaks unashamedly and directly to power, and places the material inequalities of contemporary UK society at the heart of its vision of unremitting misery.

The film was shot at a number of locations including Dover Castle, the Tower of London, Wrotham Park and Hatfield House. The latter contains, among other treasures, *The Rainbow Portrait* of Queen Elizabeth I (*c.* 1600–1602, attributed to Gheeraerts the

Younger). As Lear's adversaries oversee the preparations for war, maps, charts and computer strategies are juxtaposed with Elizabethan architecture and iconography; *The Rainbow Portrait* is clearly visible among the new technologies of modern warfare (see Figure 4). The scene seems to insist upon a connection between violence and majesty or, in the modern setting, government.

Figure 3: Gloucester (Jim Broadbent) and Edgar (Andrew Scott)

Figure 4: Goneril (Emma Thompson) and Albany (Anthony Calf)

As the opening sequence whisks us along the river, we hover high above Tower Bridge before descending into the Tower itself. (Is this a knowing allusion to Olivier's skimming of the banks of the Thames which begins his 1944 film of *Henry V*?) It is a rainy evening and Jim Broadbent's Gloucester sweeps into the courtyard in a black Range Rover and is greeted by Kent (Jim Carter) and the two of them converse about the King's political preferences as they ascend the steps to enter a council chamber.

The setting of Lear's dis-investiture points to the timelessness of Shakespeare's family drama for it takes place in a vaulted medieval chamber with burly columns of thick-set stone blocks around a table of state-of-the-art steel and glass. The immortal majesty of Lear's office is underlined by the stasis of the massive architecture while his unpredictability, his quixotic fickleness, is hinted at by the faddishness of the post-modern furniture. There is a good deal of frustrated alpha-male in this first scene: wild mood swings, vanity, Manichean naivety, childishness, personal glorification and spiteful idiosyncrasy. Less personally, the scene establishes a series of parallel thematic tensions: stability vs transience, ancient vs modern, political office vs political person as the king's two bodies are riven by his whimsy.

Lear's bifurcation is underlined by the ubiquity of his alter-ego. Karl Johnson's Fool shadows the King, peering mischievously over his shoulder, his comic grin utterly inappropriate to such a momentous occasion. Ten years separate the ages of Johnson and Hopkins but, here, they are mirror images of each other. Both are entirely grey, gaunt and wear short white beards – more stubble than beard. Eyre commented, 'I wanted the Fool to be like Lear's Doppelganger – same age, one with power, one without' ('Email'). Both of them resemble Wilfred Brambell's shabby rag-and-bone man from *Steptoe and Son* (BBC1,

1962-1974). The TV comedy is over half a century old but the echo unmistakeable – the Fool even wears Steptoe's pork-pie hat and later Lear sports his fingerless mitts.[2] Steptoe is a personification of parsimony, retentive, irritable and miserly with antecedents in both Fagin and Scrooge. Eyre's determination to underline the prevailing UK climate of stinginess – ranging from the authorities' cavalier treatment of the residents of Grenfell Tower or the Windrush generation to its despicable cuts to social and medical care which seem disproportionally to affect its most vulnerable – accents the film's emphasis on ruthless self-interest. Eyre's Albion is no country for (these two) old men.

The symmetry between Lear and his Fool is maintained throughout. As Gloucester rescues them from the heath in a military ambulance, they are driven away, lying next to each other in the back, the Fool's death-rattle marking the end of their agonised symbiosis.[3] At one point the Fool produces a horseshoe with which he instates Lear; the upturned heel caulks of the shoe form the points of a sort of parody crown but they are also the horns of the dispossessed snail with which the Fool taunts Lear: 'I can tell why a snail has a house […] not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case' (1.5.23–6). After the Fool's death, Lear wears both the Fool's hat and, within it, he keeps the horseshoe which he produces when he fantasises about shoeing his cavalry with felt (4.5.177), sneaking up on Cornwall (a full bin liner in Lear's shopping trolley) and attacking 'him'. Earlier he has produced the horseshoe and raised it above his head as though to strike Goneril with it, causing her to flinch: 'The older daughters are physically terrified of their father' ('Email') and 'It's not hard for fathers to feel that their children are their possessions

[2] Disappointingly, for me, Eyre wrote, 'I wasn't thinking of Steptoe' ('Email').
[3] 'In productions of the play people ALWAYS ask: what happened to the fool? I wanted to make it clear: he dies of exhaustion' ('Email').

and, for children, to feel they need to get away from their parents' ('Notes'). The traditionally lucky horseshoe is here symbolic of a chivalric age gone horribly wrong.

In the opening scene the vaunting rhetoric of Emma Thompson's Goneril (clearly taken by surprise to be asked to speak first) and Emily Watson's Regan is greeted with Cordelia's (Florence Pugh) wry half-smile. Her asides in the play-text, 'What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent' (1.1.57) and 'Then poor Cordelia,/ And yet not so, since I am sure my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue' (71–3), usually addressed downstage to a theatre audience, have no place within the frame of this realist setting and her knowing expression (this sorority competition is not happening for the first time) is tasked with informing the viewer that she assumes, fatally as it turns out on this occasion, that this is merely another of her old dad's silly games – as Goneril puts it later, 'O ho, I know the riddle' (5.1.26). As Regan starts to speak, she is egged on by Cornwall's (Tobias Menzies) winking to her, though Lear's drawing round the map's Cornish coast crudely with a marker pen – is this how great men carve up the world? – seems to offer Cornwall little more than he already presides over, and he and Regan register their disappointment with lowered scowls. Their ingratitude here provides an additional motivation for their subsequent betrayal.

As Lear addresses his 'joy' (1.1.77) he circles Cordelia and puts his hand on her hair, perching on the edge of the table in front of her. Without the prior asides, Cordelia's 'Nothing' (1.1.82) sounds churlish and Lear's wounded response, not unreasonable. Her subsequent insistence that he make it known that 'It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,/ No unchaste action or dishonoured step/ That hath deprived me of your grace and favour' (1.1.222–4) is delivered with an expression of cold defiance. In spite of the

trimming of Cordelia's asides, Eyre is adamant on her centrality to his reading of the play: 'It's a harsh male world, redeemed by the force of one honest, luminous woman: Cordelia' ('Notes'). However, Cordelia's generous personality, which we do see in the later reconciliation to her father, is one of the unfortunate casualties of cutting the play down to a film-script length. Add to the exclusion of her asides the omission of France's (Chukwudi Iwuji) complimentary account of her as 'this unprized precious maid' (1.1.254) and Lear's response, while extreme, seems not at all deranged. Indeed, his anger is not fully engaged until 'Hence and avoid my sight!' (1.1.118). Hopkins seemed quite able to keep the lid deliberately on Lear's emotions, so that this version of the monarch defied Regan's suggestion that he has never really been in control: 'he hath ever but slenderly known himself' (1.1.284–5). Most conspicuous in the play's climactic final scene was Lear's matter-of-fact exemplification of the unfairness that dogs, horses and rats continue to breathe while Cordelia has 'no breath at all' (5.3.281, see Figure 5). This was not madness – it was disarmingly agonising common sense.[4]

Figure 5: Lear (Anthony Hopkins)

[4] 'I think it's a mistake to call Lear's madness "senile dementia". It isn't. Senile dementia is an irreversible condition. Lear is never more sane than in the last 3 scenes of his. His madness is like a massive short-circuit: he just can't cope with rejection, relationships that he doesn't control, his uncontrollable rages, his utter confusion, etc.' ('Email').

Following the disarray of familial disintegration with the banishment of Cordelia, courtiers exited hurriedly past John Macmillan's Edmund (in full military fatigues) who, left alone, turned abruptly to the camera and discoursed on the prejudice of his being dispossessed (see Figure 6). Gloucester's naive and precipitate condemnation of Edgar follows and we see the soldier enter a university study to find his brother (Andrew Scott), an academic astrophysicist, seated in front of a blackboard crammed with Einsteinesque equations and peering at a collection of solar flares. Behind him is another image of an eclipse which nicely prompts Edmund's 'O these eclipses do portend these divisions' (1.2.118–19) and, retrospectively, Gloucester's own 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us' (1.2.91–2). Eyre describes Edgar as 'a mild and trusting intellectual' ('Notes') and this quiet, bespectacled man of abstruse cosmography, stands little chance against his brother who can manipulate suspicion and science in equal measure as circumstances demand.

Figure 6: Edmund (John Macmillan)

The claustrophobic intrigue of Edgar's study is exchanged for the outdoors with Lear and his knights out hunting (see Figure 7). It is here that Carter's Kent (with newly cropped hair and sans earlier moustache) seeks to offer the monarch his service. As he remarks on Lear's inherent kingliness, he reaches towards his master's collar and, buttoning it up, tidies him like an attentive mother. Later in the pouring rain, soaked to the skin and lamenting that he is 'More sinned against than sinning' (3.2.58), Lear will have his button again adjusted by Kent – a servant whose loyalty extends to both Lear's political office and his frozen and soaked body. Both occasions foreshadow Lear's final 'Pray you, undo this button' (5.3.283) and Edgar's clumsy intervention. As Lear's corpse is laid next to that of his three daughters on a low industrial trolley, Kent attempts to drag it away, following his monarch's spirit. Overcome with the weight of the load, he falls onto his knees, still clutching the trolley's shaft. I was reminded of Boxer from Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), whose commitment is determined, pathetic and pointless in equal measure. Two soldiers take over the pulling of the cart and Kent follows, redundantly, out through a gate into the white-out of the film's ending.

Figure 7: Lear's knights return from hunting (location: Wrotham Park)

As well as the monarch's physical penury, Eyre draws attention to his sudden and unexpected mental collapse. As Albany (Anthony Calf) remonstrates with the King, Lear suddenly grabs his face and kisses him full on the lips. Later, as he tells Goneril that they will 'no more meet, no more see one another' (2.4.213), again, he pulls her close and kisses her fully on the mouth. On both kissing occasions, there is a confused pause from Lear as though he were trying to explain to himself what he had just done. His descent into insanity seems so rapid as to overwhelm him and his 'O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!' (1.5.37) is a heart-breaking *cri du cœur*.

The mad king becomes a down-and-out, pushing his wire trolley full of detritus, around a brutalist pedestrianised shopping centre (the location was Stevenage), among drunks swigging cans of Special Brew and the homeless propped against shop windows in their sleeping bags. Here he encounters Gloucester and Edgar, sitting on a bench. In this setting of homelessness and poverty, the play's most penetrating discussion takes place between the blind Earl and the beggar-king: 'Get thee glass eyes,/ And, like a scurvy politician, seem/ To see the things thou dost not' (4.5.162–4). The advocates of sustained austerity should be squirming in their seats. The force of this shopping-centre sequence is that, as he becomes a member of the dispossessed, so Lear's dispossession renders him invisible to them; they pay no attention to his ravings. The madman in their midst has carved up the realm and triggered the civil war in which they will shortly be embroiled; decisions made by the powerful impact most terribly upon the powerless.

There follows the battle sequence which deploys genuine footage of fighter jets and decimated buildings but this is unfortunately intercut with Edgar urging his father to take shelter in an abandoned house. As they cower from the cross-fire, the nearby bus shelter is

peppered with bullets. This sequence is all a bit too 'action-movie' and the emotionally intense moment of Gloucester recognising his son 'feelingly' (4.5.143) as Edgar draws his father's fingers over his own facial features, is all but over-shadowed as the world explodes around them.

Set in 'the stern medieval Dover Castle' ('Look'), the duel between Edgar and Edmund is a weaponless kick-boxing contest which includes biting and gouging, Edgar's identity being hidden by a black balaclava (see Figure 8). There is plenty of violence with the army clustering round and egging them on, filmed 'in a vivid and restless style with a lot of movement and febrile energy' ('Look'). The whole of this final movement was shot with the colours almost entirely bleached out so that the sequence looked nearly black and white (cinematography was by Ben Smithard). Eyre's diminishing use of colour offers a visual equivalence to familial and political disintegration: 'The colours of the sets and costumes will contrast warm domestic colours with the harsh grey and khaki of military life – a descent from comfort to bleakness, from order to chaos' ('Look').

Figure 8: Edgar (Andrew Scott) and Edmund (John Macmillan)

Lear's entry, dragging Cordelia's corpse behind him in a canvas shroud, is beautifully understated. His 'She's gone for ever' (5.3.233) was perfectly calm, rational, realistic. There was nothing at all unhinged about this resignation. In the Folio, as Kent is re-introduced to Lear, the King reacts with 'A plague upon you murderers, traitors all!' (5.3.243). The Quarto is slightly different: 'A plague upon your murderous traitors all!' (5.3.265). In Eyre's script, the line became 'a plague upon *us*, murderers, traitors all'. Perhaps, in his dying moments Lear recognised his own complicity in the death of his daughter. While this small change of diction supports my interpretation here of inter-generational friction and stands as a way of reading this moment in the film, in actual fact, Eyre had not changed the text here: 'No, it should have been "you". A mistake when we were filming (blame the intense cold and intense emotion) and one that I couldn't correct in post-sync' ('Email'). But 'us' remains in the film and the effect is to suggest that Lear was conscious of his contribution to the chain reaction of political and economic ruin; he is as much to blame as anyone. The fact that he seems to speak this in full knowledge of what he is saying reinforces even more the agency of political masters in the ruination of their citizens' wellbeing.

The film followed the Folio in allocating the play's closing lines to Edgar: 'we that are young/ Shall never see so much [*pause and then speaking directly to camera*], nor live so long' (5.3.299-300). He addresses us right on, as Edmund had done during the discussion of his own dispossession (see Figure 9). The Folio allocation of the lines to Edgar (in the Quarto the play is concluded by his elder, Albany) seemed to suggest that the younger generation was disempowered by their seniors; that the austerity, violence and impoverishment they were suffering were not of their own making and that political, social and economic cures might never be found – in their lifetimes, at least.

Figure 9: Edgar (Andrew Scott)

Estimates suggest that 73% of those under 24 years voted against Brexit. They must now live with the consequences of the tyranny of a shamefully misinformed referendum and the rise in isolationism that is the new political orthodoxy, imposed from above. Eyre's parting shot was a misty white-out. There could be no better symbol of the chaos and uncertainty that lie ahead.[5]

[5] 'The misty white-out was deliberately opaque: where are they going??? I can't answer this: uncertainty and chaos is your guess. A good one.' ('Email').