

Is 'Empire' Based On 'The Lion In Winter'? 'King Lear' Isn't The Only Play Fox's Drama Draws From



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There's something epic about the heightened drama of *Empire*, wouldn't you say? Many critics have already compared it to *Game of Thrones*, with so many parties vying for one regal goal. This is not too surprising, as [Empire is based on The Lion in Winter](#) in addition to William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as writer Danny Strong told *Entertainment Weekly*. Sure, [the hip hop drama is based in reality](#) too, but isn't the fantasy much more fun? Now, most folks are familiar with Shakespeare and we've seen his plays updated for modern audiences in *10 Things I Hate About You*, *West Side Story*, *The Lion King*, and *She's The Man*. So [what does James Goldman's The Lion In Winter have to do with Empire?](#)

Like *King Lear*, this play is about a fictional English monarch. However, it was written in the '60s, not the sixteenth century. Neither play is a musical like *Empire*. The *Lion In Winter* [film adaptation starred Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn](#), the last two people you'd ever expect to be in the music industry.

Still, when you look at the each, they're more similar than you may think and not just because the name of the dynasty in *Empire* is "Lyon." Family stories all share similar character elements. Think how often the female characters of *Little Women*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sex and the City*, *Girls*, and *Downton Abbey* are compared. This is no different, and the comparisons don't stop with the characters. Let me break down the specifics of *The Lion in Winter* so you can wow your friends with this *Empire* trivia.

The King

The Lion In Winter is about the manipulative [King Henry II's court during Christmas in the Middle Ages](#), with his family and their guests. *Empire* is about Lucious Lyon's changing family dynamic after learning he has ALS. Of course, the series doesn't just take place over Christmas.

The Queen

The Lion In Winter begins with the Queen, Eleanor, being released from prison, just like Cookie is in the *Empire* pilot. However, in the play, she is released by the King, who imprisoned her for attempting to start a Civil War. Lucious has no idea that his wife has returned until it is almost too late, and she went to jail in order to take the fall for him and save the business. Queen Eleanor, as I mentioned before, has been played by powerhouse actresses like Katharine Hepburn, Glenn Close in the 2003 film, and Rosemary Harris in the original Broadway production. Suffice to say, it's a meaty role, and Taraji P. Henson's take on Cookie is already right up there with them.

The Sons

Just like *Empire*, King Henry has three sons who all want to succeed him — Richard Lionheart, Geoffrey, and John. The youngest, John, is a lot like Hakeem on *Empire*. Both of them are easily manipulated, change their mind a lot, are the apple of their father's eyes, and not necessarily the strongest contender.

The other two sons in both pieces also share qualities, though the comparison is a little less clear. In the play is it Richard, [the eldest son, who had a homosexual affair](#). His lover, King Philip of France, proves to be just as manipulative as Richard's father. On *Empire*, the middle son Jamal is gay and happily living with a boyfriend. Should we be keeping our eye on Michael to claim his part of the spotlight? That said, the middle son in *The Lion In Winter*, Geoffrey, is a lot more like *Empire*'s eldest, Andre. While he, like Jamal, yearns for his father's affection, he is more ruthless than his brothers and seeks to take over the business when his other brothers have destroyed each other.

The Girlfriend

Lucious's girlfriend and coworker Anika could be based on Alais, a young girl in *The Lion In Winter* who is in love with King Henry. Like Philip, she shows her true ruthless colors by the curtain's fall. In the play, [Eleanor and Alais know each other](#), which is not the case on *Empire*. This character could also be the inspiration for Rhonda Lyon, Andre's whispering wife with schemes of her own to exact upon the family. In the play, Alais was betrothed

first to Richard — could Anika have a complicated family backstory? She's not my favorite character so far, but I'm definitely watching her moves with a cautious eye. Team Cookie!

Images: Chuck Hodes/FOX (5)