

KING LEAR

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



EDITED BY GRACE IOPPLO

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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William Shakespeare
KING LEAR



AN AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
SOURCES
CRITICISM
ADAPTATIONS AND RESPONSES

Edited by
GRACE IOPPOLO
UNIVERSITY OF READING

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Introduction

In case it please God to provide you to all these three kingdomes, make your eldest sonne Issac [i.e., the son of Abraham], leaving him all your kingdomes; and provyde the rest with private possessions. Otherwaies by deviding your kingdomes, ye shall leave the seede of division & discorde among your posteritie.

—King James I to his eldest son, Prince Henry, in *Basilikon Doron*, 1603¹

On December 26, St. Stephen's Night, 1606, Shakespeare's acting company, the King's Men, of which he was a sharer and the principal dramatist, performed a play only recently composed, *King Lear*, in front of their monarch, and patron, King James I, and his court at Whitehall Palace as part of their Christmas celebrations. What James, the proud author of a number of political treatises, including *Basilikon Doron*, must have thought in hearing his very words about the dangers of dividing a kingdom, as well as the problems caused by allowing illegitimate sons (such as Ishmael) to share the inheritance of legitimate sons (such as Isaac) is not known, but can certainly be imagined. In fact the play has long tested the imagination of literary and theatrical audiences, proving only too forcefully that

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

—*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.12–17)

Shakespeare's abstract and exquisite rendering here of the powers and "tricks" of "strong imagination" (5.1.7–18) in the mid-1590s was made only too real and brutal ten years later in *King Lear*, in which the most savage acts of cruelty are not imagined but staged for an audience who is made to feel complicit and culpable.

1. *Basilikon Doron* [*The King's Gift*]: or His Maiesties Instructions to his dearest sonne, Henry the Prince (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1603), Books 2–3, signatures H1^r-H2^r.

King Lear is Shakespeare's most perfect embodiment both of his own artistic vision as a "poet" and of the tragic genre he and other early modern dramatists inherited from classical authors. The Greek philosopher Aristotle had claimed in *The Poetics* that tragedy must be "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," complete with embellished language, and "in the form of action, not of narrative," with the result that through "pity and fear" would be effected "the proper purgation of these emotions." Aristotle did not make clear whether this purgation was to come through the pity and fear of the audience or of the characters or "the poet," as the dramatist Shakespeare referred to himself, or all of them; however Aristotle did decree that tragedy must involve the fall of a great man through a fatal flaw. The Roman dramatist Seneca offered an equally fatalistic model of tragedy, but one resulting from a family member's desire to extract vengeance for murder or an equally heinous crime. Less dramatically powerful was a more recent model, the "de casibus" tragedy, offered by Boccaccio in *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (1363) and adapted by Chaucer (most obviously in *The Monk's Tale*), showing, as Boccaccio's translated title suggests, the examples of famous men fallen from fortune. Yet this type of fall shows the usually awkward tension between the classical belief that the pagan goddess Fortune's spinning wheel controlled a person's fate and the medieval Christian tenet that God alone determined a person's fate, although that person could choose to reject God's fortune (or fortunate gifts) through the exercise of free will.

Early in his career, Shakespeare followed the formulaic model of Seneca, which had proved enduringly popular with Elizabethan audiences, in such revenge tragedies as *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*. But by the early 1600s he began to experiment with tragedy, as in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, which not only used both the Aristotelian and Senecan models but cross-referenced them, showing how the conflict between a character's need to exact vengeance and his own fatal flaw doomed him to a tragic conclusion from which he was powerless to extricate himself. In fact, the character's ultimate comprehension that he could not extricate himself provided him with redemption. By December 1606, the last possible date for the composition of *King Lear*, Shakespeare seems to have concluded that allowing his tragic characters the scope to challenge and reject their "promised end," as Kent will come to call it in the play's last scene, was worth exploring for five acts. In addition, Shakespeare appears to have decided that a character's redemption was no longer the poet's concern, nor was it his concern to encourage an audience to use their imaginations only to envision tragedy. He also seemed to mock the *de casibus* form of tragedy by

allowing Lear to rant madly on the heath about his victimization by Fortune, all the while laying bare Lear's deliberate rejection of what the audience would have recognized as Christian fortune, which he comes to understand much too late.

Such a deviation in the Jacobean period from the standard norms of Elizabethan tragedy did not come without a cost. For Shakespeare, that cost was reinterpreting the graphic, but natural, brutality between two warring political families in *Titus Andronicus*, in which a powerful matriarch of one family destroys the patriarch of a rival family, as the graphic, but much more unnatural, brutality *within* one warring family in *King Lear*, in which two matriarchs destroy the patriarch of their own family, with another family easily appropriating such strategy. The revenge desired by Tamora for Titus's murder of her sons, Hamlet's for Claudius's murder of Old Hamlet, and Macduff's for Macbeth's murder of his own family and of Duncan in earlier plays gives way to Goneril and Regan's growing, and unexplained, resentment of Lear in the later play. By 1606 and the composition of *Lear*, motives are not required for the main tragic plot, and those required for the tragic subplot are petty and entirely personal. Shakespeare's domestication, and internalization, of motiveless, or at least ambiguous, tragedy in *King Lear* would forever change the tragic form and genre, paving the way for the great tragedies of the 1610s and 1620s, including *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, most basically in making female characters and their domestic world deserving of and, paradoxically, causing tragedy.

If Shakespeare did not feel constrained in *King Lear* to follow the models of contemporary tragedy, he was equally uninterested in strictly adhering to his main source, *The Chronicle History of King Leir*, which, although not printed until 1605, was almost certainly in performance on the London stage for some years earlier, possibly with Shakespeare in the cast. In this source play, the now-anonymous author followed his main sources, including chronicle histories by Holinshed and Camden and the popular poems *The Mirror for Magistrates* and *The Faerie Queene* (see Sources, pages 137–59), which presented all the basic elements of the Leir story: his long reign as king of Britain; his petulant love-test of his three daughters; the refusal of his youngest daughter to flatter him in her answer; his rejection of her, and her dowerless marriage to the kindly King of Gaul (or France); Leir's two older daughters' ultimate rejection of him, and his reconciliation with his youngest daughter, who with her husband helps him overthrow the armed rebellion of his older daughters; and, finally, Leir's triumphant return to power. Although the play *King Leir* ends at this point, the sources continue with the story of the youngest daughter's succes-

sion to her father's throne upon his death, and her peaceful rule for a few years until her usurpation by her evil nephews and her suicide in prison.

Although the Leir story was a seminal part of British history and folk-tale, Shakespeare tampered with it, altering the ending to tragedy, or at least moving up Cordelia's tragic end to a much earlier point; perhaps for this reason the original naming of *King Lear* as a "Chronicle History" on the title page of its first printing in 1608 in Quarto 1 was changed to a "Tragedy" in the First Folio in 1623. Shakespeare also adopted a subplot from another popular text, Sidney's prose romance *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, which recounted the blinding of the corrupt Paphlagonian king by his illegitimate son Plexirtus and his rescue by his legitimate son Leonatus (see pp. 153–56). Although Shakespeare may have borrowed the Leir story indirectly from Higgins and Spenser through the source play, he borrowed from Sidney directly, perhaps to salute him as one of the triumvirate of Elizabethan master-poets on whom Shakespeare drew for inspiration in using the "poet's pen." At any rate, what seems yet one more of the countless unhappy fables recounted in *The Arcadia* moved effortlessly and seamlessly into Shakespeare's imagining of the wider repercussions of Lear's increasingly cruel set of kingdoms.

Once it is understood that Shakespeare borrowed from his sources nearly all the physically and emotionally abusive behavior (including the misogynistic treatment of his daughters) and the graphically explicit violence in the play (including Gloucester's blinding, and the hanging of Cordelia, suggested by Sidney's presentation in *The Faerie Queene* of her eventual method of suicide), it is difficult to support uninformed critics from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century who have proclaimed their revulsion at Shakespeare's "invention" or "imagination" of such despicable and multiple forms of cruelty. Shakespeare did not imagine the blinding of Gloucester, Sidney did. Shakespeare did not imagine that a seemingly incestuous father would demand that his daughters publicly, and unnaturally, pledge their entire capacity of love to him above all others, Geoffrey of Monmouth and his succeeding historians did. Shakespeare did not first counsel a ruler, "Ye shall leave the seede of division & discorde among your posteritie," should he consider "dividing" the united British kingdom among his children into three separate kingdoms, King James did. Nor did Shakespeare first envision a monarch as possessing two bodies, the body politic and the body natural, the imbalance of which could lead to disease and corruption. For this proverbial myth and cultural truth he could look not only to James but James's immediate predecessors, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I, all of whom

waged their own battles, some more successfully than others, to prevent the body natural from destroying the body politic.

What Shakespeare did imagine were the repercussions if these warnings about familial and political struggles were not heeded. More basically, he may have witnessed in his own family, or heard about the accounts of witnesses in another family such as the Annesleys (see Sources, pp. 160–62), the jealousies and long-suppressed resentments that surface when a dying father divides family property. James, whose royal inheritance first in Scotland (as the heir of his imprisoned and executed mother Mary, Queen of Scots) and then in England (as Elizabeth's reluctant choice of successor) was fraught, to say the least, seems to be drawing on personal experience in his warning in *Basilikon Doron*. *King Lear* is certainly the product of a mature imagination in more ways than one; only the Shakespeare who has already spent more than a decade acting in and writing plays could have produced the incredibly subtle and exceptionally finely tuned characterizations and simultaneously spare and terse dialogue in this play. Nor are the visions of family strife part of a young writer's inexperience, but of an author in mid-life (just past the age of forty, as Shakespeare was), who had suffered the death of his elderly father in 1601, as well as of some of his siblings and one of his children (Shakespeare's mother would die in 1608, the same year in which *Lear* was first published). It is tempting to wonder if Shakespeare's *Lear* sprang from his own experience in seeing a once strong father (or grandfather?) become feeble and act so rashly, perhaps in a single moment, that he alienated his adult children, who finally feel justified in airing their long-simmering resentments against him and their siblings, particularly those thought to be "favorite" children. Such resentment often springs from the guilt of a child toward a parent and not a sibling, making the emotions all the more complex and intense. Any adult who has witnessed the family "division & discord" of which James speaks before or after a parent's funeral or the reading of a parent's will would surely understand that the Lear family is no different than any other. This is what Shakespeare understands, but Lear does not.

It may be this discomfort with facing up to repressed fear, anger, and guilt that has made the play so very uncomfortable and awkward for its audiences. Charles Lamb was not seriously challenged when he proclaimed in 1810 that "Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage" (see pp. 172–73). Nor did critics disagree with William Hazlitt's brusque admission in 1817, "We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even what we ourselves conceive of it" (see pp. 173–74); according to Hazlitt, *King*

Lear is literally "nothing," but at the same time it is something that manages to enlarge our imagination on a conscious and unconscious level. The Polish critic Jan Kott, who had so shrewdly correlated the corruption caused by the Soviet occupation of his country to the events of *King Lear*, suggested that familial resentments could infect the wider culture and political structure. Kott recognized that "the attitude of modern criticism to *King Lear* is ambiguous and somehow embarrassed" (see pages 177-79), as if self-scrutiny of our most basic human relationships is so painful that we cannot acknowledge even the possibility of it.

Kott's trenchant commentary on *King Lear* as Shakespeare's most modern work finally succeeded in rehabilitating the play, both as a magnificent literary and cultural text and a powerful theatrical experience. Kott's was not an easy achievement. In 1681, the poet Nahum Tate announced that Shakespeare's *King Lear* so resembled "a Heap of Jewels, unstrung, and unpolisht; yet so dazling in their Disorder" (see pp. 169-70) that this "Heap" alienated Restoration audiences who were still being confronted by the bloody consequences of the Civil War (including the execution of King Charles I, the Interregnum and rule of Oliver Cromwell, and the return of the exiled British monarch in the person of Charles II). Tate was compelled to offer some solace in the form of his revision of the play, which "restored" the happy ending of the chronicles and the source play, while adding a love story between Edgar and Cordelia, who live happily ever after. Tate's revision was so comforting in its easy sentimentality, or Shakespeare's original was so intimidating in its intellectual force, that Tate's tragicomedy replaced Shakespeare's tragedy on the London stage for over one hundred and fifty years. Tate's version was "refined" by later writers, but it must be remembered that the great actors of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century who excelled in the role of Lear, including the much-praised David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, and Charles Kean, were performing in Tate's much inferior adaptation, in literary and theatrical terms, of Shakespeare's play.

All the while *King Lear* on stage remained Tate's for those one hundred and fifty years, it remained Shakespearean on the page. Due to the great vogue for editing Shakespeare's texts, multivolume editions of his plays began to appear every twenty years or so beginning in 1709, with each succeeding editor eager to point out the defects of preceding editors. The great editors such as Rowe, Capell, Steevens, and Malone were quick to dismiss the inferiority of Tate's version of *Lear* while struggling to offer some guidance to readers about Shakespeare's version. Typical of these editors was Samuel Johnson's somewhat stingy statement that the play "is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of *Shakespeare*." Dr. Johnson

charitably noted that "so powerful is the current of the poet's imagination, that the mind, which once ventures within it, is hurried irresistibly along," but concluded by apologizing for Shakespeare: "Perhaps if we turn our thoughts upon the barbarity and ignorance of the age to which this story is referred, it will appear not so unlikely as while we estimate *Lear's* manners by our own" (see pp. 170–72). Yet Johnson failed to comprehend or acknowledge that this barbarity and ignorance sprang at least partly from Shakespeare's sources, not solely from his "imagination."

It was no surprise then that both Lamb and Hazlitt professed a lack of interest in engaging with Shakespeare's play of *King Lear*. Keats seemed to enjoy tasting the "bittersweet of this Shakespearian fruit" when sitting down to read Shakespeare's text (see p. 261), although he would not have been able to see it staged, for it was not until 1834 that William Macready courageously returned the original play to the stage (albeit with some "refinements"). Only the applause of his audience on opening night confirmed to the anxious Macready that he had done the right thing. Later nineteenth century productions, as Kott notes, struggled to make the play meaningful to audiences; if Shakespeare's *Lear* could be seen as "black theatre" to the Romantics, it was presented as such a purified embodiment of Victorian sentiment that its plot and its characters became "ridiculous" (see pp. 177–78). The great mid-twentieth-century British productions of the play combined the formidable talents of directors like Harley Granville-Barker and Tyrone Guthrie and actors like John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier, and of critics like A. C. Bradley (who primarily saw the play through its characters and their movement toward Christian redemption; see pp. 175–76). Such productions succeeded only in reminding audiences that they should respect Shakespeare's achievements in *King Lear* if they could not bring themselves to admire them.

So, when Kott proposed in 1961 that the play should be read as a counterpart to the works of Bertold Brecht and Samuel Beckett, and that *Lear* could be recognized as a stylized and symbolic representation of the grotesque nature of modern cruelty, the British theatre director Peter Brook agreed. Brook's now legendary production of the play in 1962 for the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-on-Avon, with Paul Scofield in the title role, was a result of his conversations with Kott, who emphasized, "There is in *King Lear*—and Mr Brook was the first to discover it—a combination of madness, passion, pride, folly, imperiousness, anarchy, humanity and awe, which all have their exact place and time in history" (see p. 178). Brook explained, "Experimentally, we can approach *Lear* not as a linear narrative, but as a cluster of relationships." Reject-

ing the modern convention of elaborate sets and costumes, Brook demanded a return to the play stripped bare in the type of vision offered by Kott, deciding that "the play is directly related to the most burning themes of our time, the old and the new in relation to our society, our arts, our notions of progress, our way of living our lives." As the theatre director Brook stressed, in direct contrast to the literary critic Charles Lamb, *King Lear* could be represented on the stage, for it is up to actors, not critics, to interpret this vision to their audiences: "If the actors are interested, this is what they will bring out. If we are interested, that is what we will find. . . . The meaning will be for the moment of the performance" (see pp. 179–81).

The visions of Kott and Brook, and later of the great film directors Grigori Kozintsev and Akira Kurosawa, who were influenced by them, were rooted not only in theatre history but in a postwar world. As R. A. Foakes argues, the rise of the nuclear age displaced *Hamlet* and placed *King Lear* as Shakespeare's most modern, most accessible, and most representative play; no longer could *King Lear* be defined as a Bradleyian pilgrimage to redemption, but as Shakespeare's "bleakest and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied" (see pp. 240–43). With the application of postmodern theory, *King Lear* began to serve as Shakespeare's most extreme example of the cultural, political, and personal failures caused by strictures inherent in the modern age and inherited from the early modern age. For feminist critics especially, the Lear story embodied the ways in which women as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and lovers suffered primarily through their absence, and only secondarily through their presence, in a world that was dysfunctional because it was patriarchal, and patriarchal because it was dysfunctional. For both Lynda E. Boose and Janet Adelman, a father-daughter relationship which is not mediated by the mother, or is mediated by a "suffocating" absent mother, produces a contemptible female sexuality that gives birth not to healthy offspring but the incestuous pseudo parent-child relationship of monarch and subject (see pp. 194–226). But the play has not only been reinterpreted by theorists in recent years; for Stanley Cavell and Margot Heinemann, *King Lear* can teach us as much about our own time, in personal and political terms, as Shakespeare's (see pp. 227–40; 243–54). The physical blindness of Gloucester and the spiritual blindness of Lear are still relevant to a postmodern and post-theory world.

Without doubt, *King Lear* helped to change not only modern Shakespearean theatre production but all theatre production; the play changed not only modern Shakespearean literary criticism but all literary criticism. *King Lear* still has the power to provoke con-

trovery and sweep away widely institutionalized beliefs about the very nature of "the poet's pen," for in the last thirty years the play has been at the forefront of renewed discussions of Shakespeare as author and reviser. Beginning with Michael Warren's influential reconsideration in 1978 of authorial revision in the play (see pp. 181–94), textual critics, literary critics, and theatre directors have increasingly come to accept that Shakespeare wrote two distinct versions of *King Lear*: one as represented by the text printed in the 1608 Quarto 1 (printed from Shakespeare's "foul papers" or original draft), and the other as represented in the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare's works (printed from a later theatrical manuscript, checked against a copy of Quarto 2, which was largely reprinted from Quarto 1). Shakespeare revised the play sometime after its composition between late 1605 and late 1606 (judging from the play's use of sources and its topical allusions) or early or later performances (including at Whitehall in front of James I, and at the Globe for public audiences and Blackfriars for private audiences) and appears to have made hundreds of minor and numerous major revisions in his original text.

In fact, a collation of the two main texts (and the unauthorized Quarto 2) shows revisions in nearly every one or two lines of *King Lear* (see Textual Variants, pp. 117–33). Sometimes the revisions seem unimportant—a contraction to emphasize informal language—or functional—a contraction to ensure the meter is regular. Some revisions may have been done by other hands, including company bookkeepers (who kept track of the company's "book," now called a "promptbook"), such as the purgation of oaths on stage from 1606, or editors or compositors, who regularized exit directions or split lines. But the majority of small- and large-scale revisions between Quarto 1 and the Folio text show a number of sophisticated and consistent authorial patterns, including the enlargement of Lear's role and the reduction of the roles of those who surround him, including Kent and Cordelia, in order to further portray Lear's increasing isolation; the role of the Fool grows, perhaps because he symbolizes Lear's conscience. As if to forestall the kinds of critical attack launched on him by his later critics, including Tate, Lamb, and Hazlitt, Shakespeare appeared to soften the "barbarity" and "cruelty" of the play; the unbearably harsh "mock-trial" of Goneril and Regan by their father and his maddened companions in the Quartos does not appear in the Folio, and Lear apparently dies believing that Cordelia is still alive in the Folio, unlike in the Quartos, where he dies in total despair at the execution of his "poor fool". However the blinding of Gloucester in 3.7 is somewhat redeemed in the Quartos only, for Gloucester is not cast out alone after being blinded, as in the Folio text, but is followed by two sym-

pathetic servants determined to help heal him by applying "flaxe and whites of egges" to "his bleeding face." Gloucester is denied this succor in the Folio text.

It may not be possible to decide definitively which version of the play is less "cruel" or more "redemptive" (or "better" or "worse"); perhaps Shakespeare is warning us that it is not important to decide. *King Lear*, in any given moment, can be a Jacobean tragedy, a primer on royal duty, a political treatise, a psychoanalytic investigation of dysfunctional families, an exploration of misogyny, a modern rendering of a post-nuclear culture, or a cathartic theatrical experience in which pity and fear are purged. Or it can simply be proof that none of these effects or concerns can be brought to this or any other play; that is, the play is a negation of anything we bring to it or imagine of it "in the moment," to use Brook's term. As Shakespeare shrewdly acknowledged in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it was the poet's pen that gave to "airy nothing" a "local habitation and a name," but it is the audience of Oberon, Hippolyta, and the others at court who judge the habitation and name given to *Pyramus and Thisbe* by its dramatists and actors in performance. In *King Lear*, so punctuated with the word "nothing," Shakespeare hands the poet's job to his audience, and it is for us, not Lear or Cordelia, or Lamb or Hazlitt, or Shakespeare, to make something or nothing come from airy nothing, and, as Brook reminds us, "If we are interested, that is what we will find."

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The Text of
KING LEAR



M. William Shak-spere:

HIS

True Chronicle Historie of the life and
death of King L E A R and his three
Daughters.

*With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne
and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his
fullen and assumed humor of
TOM of Bedlam:*

*As it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall upon
S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes.*

By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe
on the Bancke-side.



L O N D O N,

Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in *Pauls*
Church-yard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere
St. Austins Gate. 1608.

Title page of the 1608 Quarto 1 edition of *King Lear*.