

*Penguin Popular Classics*

# KING LEAR

WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE



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**BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**



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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park,

New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland,

New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

[www.penguin.com](http://www.penguin.com)

Published in Penguin Popular Classics 1994

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Printed in Great Britain by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

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# THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

| APPROXIMATE DATE   | PLAYS   | FIRST PRINTED     |
|--------------------|---|-------------------|
| <i>Before 1594</i> | HENRY VI <i>three parts</i>                       | <i>Folio</i> 1623 |
|                    | RICHARD III                                       | 1597              |
|                    | TITUS ANDRONICUS                                  | 1594              |
|                    | LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST                              | 1598              |
|                    | THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF<br>VERONA                    | <i>Folio</i>      |
| 1594-1597          | THE COMEDY OF ERRORS                              | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | THE TAMING OF THE SHREW                           | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | ROMEO AND JULIET ( <i>pirated 1597</i> )          | 1599              |
|                    | A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM                         | 1600              |
|                    | RICHARD II  | 1597              |
| 1597-1600          | KING JOHN   | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | THE MERCHANT OF VENICE                            | 1600              |
|                    | HENRY IV <i>part i</i>                            | 1598              |
|                    | HENRY IV <i>part ii</i>                           | 1600              |
|                    | HENRY V ( <i>pirated 1600</i> )                   | <i>Folio</i>      |
| 1601-1608          | MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING                            | 1600              |
|                    | MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR<br>( <i>pirated 1602</i> ) | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | AS YOU LIKE IT                                    | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | JULIUS CAESAR                                     | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | TROYLUS AND CRESSIDA                              | 1609              |
| 1601-1608          | HAMLET ( <i>pirated 1603</i> )                    | 1604              |
|                    | TWELFTH NIGHT                                     | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | MEASURE FOR MEASURE                               | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL                         | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | OTHELLO   | 1622              |
| After 1608         | LEAR  | 1608              |
|                    | MACBETH   | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | TIMON OF ATHENS                                   | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA                              | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | CORIOLANUS  | <i>Folio</i>      |
| After 1608         | PERICLES ( <i>omitted from the Folio</i> )        | 1609              |
|                    | CYMBELINE   | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | THE WINTER'S TALE                                 | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | THE TEMPEST                                       | <i>Folio</i>      |
|                    | HENRY VIII  | <i>Folio</i>      |

## POEMS

|               |                            |      |
|---------------|----------------------------|------|
| DATES UNKNOWN | VENUS AND ADONIS           | 1593 |
|               | THE RAPE OF LUCRECE        | 1594 |
|               | SONNETS                    | 1609 |
|               | A LOVER'S COMPLAINT }      |      |
|               | THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE | 1601 |

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

William Shakespeare was born at Stratford upon Avon in April, 1564. He was the third child, and eldest son, of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. His father was one of the most prosperous men of Stratford, who held in turn the chief offices in the town. His mother was of gentle birth, the daughter of Robert Arden of Wilmcote. In December, 1582, Shakespeare married Ann Hathaway, daughter of a farmer of Shottery, near Stratford; their first child Susanna was baptized on May 6, 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, on February 22, 1585. Little is known of Shakespeare's early life; but it is unlikely that a writer who dramatized such an incomparable range and variety of human kinds and experiences should have spent his early manhood entirely in placid pursuits in a country town. There is one tradition, not universally accepted, that he fled from Stratford because he was in trouble for deer stealing, and had fallen foul of Sir Thomas Lucy, the local magnate; another that he was for some time a schoolmaster.

From 1592 onwards the records are much fuller. In March, 1592, the Lord Strange's players produced a new play at the Rose Theatre called *Harry the Sixth*, which was very successful, and was probably the *First Part of Henry VI*. In the autumn of 1592 Robert Greene, the best known of the professional writers, as he was dying wrote a letter to three fellow writers in which he warned them against the ingratitude of players in general, and in particular against an 'upstart crow' who 'supposes he is as much able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes Factotum is in his own conceit the only



Shake-scene in a country'. This is the first reference to Shakespeare, and the whole passage suggests that Shakespeare had become suddenly famous as a playwright. At this time Shakespeare was brought into touch with Edward Alleyn the great tragedian, and Christopher Marlowe, whose thundering parts of Tamburlaine, the Jew of Malta, and Dr Faustus Alleyn was acting, as well as Hieronimo, the hero of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, the most famous of all Elizabethan plays.

In April, 1593, Shakespeare published his poem *Venus and Adonis*, which was dedicated to the young Earl of Southampton: it was a great and lasting success, and was reprinted nine times in the next few years. In May, 1594, his second poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, was also dedicated to Southampton.

There was little playing in 1593, for the theatres were shut during a severe outbreak of the plague; but in the autumn of 1594, when the plague ceased, the playing companies were reorganized, and Shakespeare became a sharer in the Lord Chamberlain's company who went to play in the Theatre in Shoreditch. During these months Marlowe and Kyd had died. Shakespeare was thus for a time without a rival. He had already written the three parts of *Henry VI*, *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Soon afterwards he wrote the first of his greater plays – *Romeo and Juliet* – and he followed this success in the next three years with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The two parts of *Henry IV*, introducing Falstaff, the most popular of all his comic characters, were written in 1597–8.

The company left the Theatre in 1597 owing to disputes over a renewal of the ground lease, and went to play at the

Curtain in the same neighbourhood. The disputes continued throughout 1598, and at Christmas the players settled the matter by demolishing the old Theatre and re-erecting a new playhouse on the South bank of the Thames, near Southwark Cathedral. This playhouse was named the Globe. The expenses of the new building were shared by the chief members of the Company, including Shakespeare, who was by now a man of some means. In 1596 he had bought New Place, a large house in the centre of Stratford, for £60, and through his father purchased a coat-of-arms from the Heralds, which was the official recognition that he and his family were gentlefolk.

By the summer of 1598 Shakespeare was recognized as the greatest of English dramatists. Booksellers were printing his more popular plays, at times even in pirated or stolen versions, and he received a remarkable tribute from a young writer named Francis Meres, in his book *Palladis Tamia*. In a long catalogue of English authors Meres gave Shakespeare more prominence than any other writer, and mentioned by name twelve of his plays.

Shortly before the Globe was opened, Shakespeare had completed the cycle of plays dealing with the whole story of the Wars of the Roses with *Henry V*. It was followed by *As You Like it*, and *Julius Caesar*, the first of the maturer tragedies. In the next three years he wrote *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*.

On March 24, 1603, Queen Elizabeth died. The company had often performed before her, but they found her successor a far more enthusiastic patron. One of the first acts of King James was to take over the company and to promote them to be his own servants so that henceforward they were known as the King's Men. They acted now very

frequently at Court, and prospered accordingly. In the early years of the reign Shakespeare wrote the more sombre comedies, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*, which were followed by *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Then he returned to Roman themes with *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.

Since 1601 Shakespeare had been writing less, and there were now a number of rival dramatists who were introducing new styles of drama, particularly Ben Jonson (whose first successful comedy, *Every Man in his Humour*, was acted by Shakespeare's company in 1598), Chapman, Dekker, Marston, and Beaumont and Fletcher who began to write in 1607. In 1608 the King's Men acquired a second playhouse, an indoor private theatre in the fashionable quarter of the Blackfriars. At private theatres, plays were performed indoors; the prices charged were higher than in the public playhouses, and the audience consequently was more select. Shakespeare seems to have retired from the stage about this time: his name does not occur in the various lists of players after 1607. Henceforward he lived for the most part at Stratford, where he was regarded as one of the most important citizens. He still wrote a few plays, and he tried his hand at the new form of tragi-comedy – a play with tragic incidents but a happy ending – which Beaumont and Fletcher had popularized. He wrote four of these – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, which was acted at Court in 1611. For the last four years of his life he lived in retirement. His son Hamnet had died in 1596: his two daughters were now married. Shakespeare died at Stratford upon Avon on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the chancel of the church, before the high altar. Shortly afterwards a memorial which still exists, with a portrait bust, was set up on the North wall. His wife survived him.

When Shakespeare died fourteen of his plays had been separately published in Quarto booklets. In 1623 his surviving fellow actors, John Heming and Henry Condell, with the co-operation of a number of printers, published a collected edition of thirty-six plays in one Folio volume, with an engraved portrait, memorial verses by Ben Jonson and others, and an Epistle to the Reader in which Heming and Condell make the interesting note that Shakespeare's 'hand and mind went together, and what he thought, he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers.'

The plays as printed in the Quartos or the Folio differ considerably from the usual modern text. They are often not divided into scenes, and sometimes not even into acts. Nor are there place-headings at the beginning of each scene, because in the Elizabethan theatre there was no scenery. They are carelessly printed and the spelling is erratic.

## THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

Although plays of one sort and another had been acted for many generations, no permanent playhouse was erected in England until 1576. In the 1570's the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London and the players were constantly at variance. As a result James Burbage, then the leader of the great Earl of Leicester's players, decided that he would erect a playhouse outside the jurisdiction of the Lord Mayor, where the players would no longer be hindered by the authorities. Accordingly in 1576 he built the Theatre in Shoreditch, at that time a suburb of London. The experiment was successful, and by 1592 there were

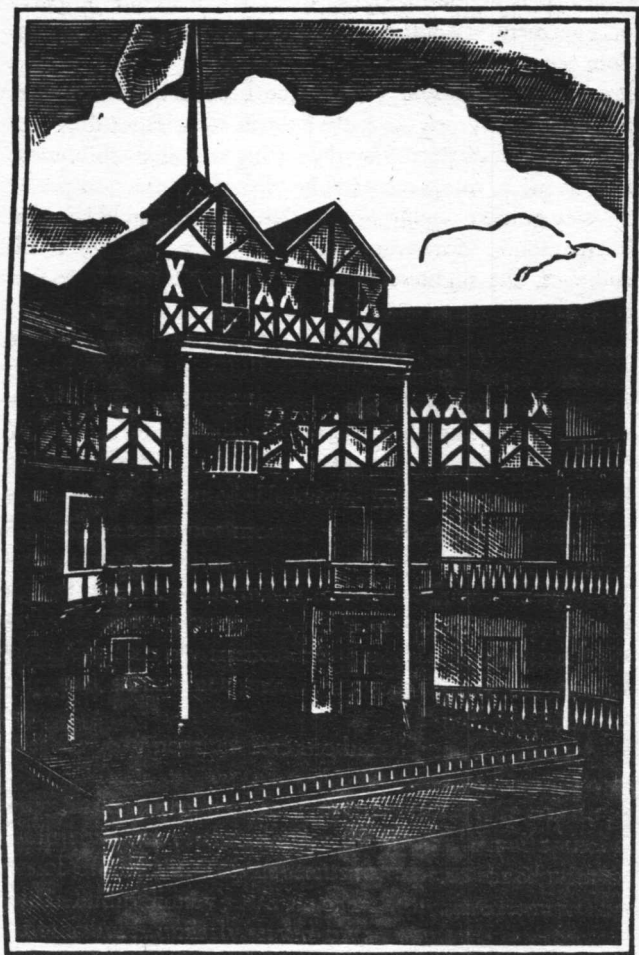
two more playhouses in London, the Curtain (also in Shoreditch, and the Rose on the south bank of the river, near Southwark Cathedral.

Elizabethan players were accustomed to act on a variety of stages; in the great hall of a nobleman's house, or one of the Queen's palaces, in town halls and in yards, as well as their own theatre.

The public playhouse for which most of Shakespeare's plays were written was a small and intimate affair. The outside measurement of the Fortune Theatre, which was built in 1600 to rival the new Globe, was but eighty feet square. Playhouses were usually circular or octagonal, with three tiers of galleries looking down upon the yard or pit, which was open to the sky. The stage jutted out into the yard so that the actors came forward into the midst of their audience.

Over the stage there was a roof, and on either side doors by which the characters entered or disappeared. Over the back of the stage ran a gallery or upper stage which was used whenever an upper scene was needed, as when Romeo climbs up to Juliet's bedroom, or the citizens of Angiers address King John from the walls. The space beneath this upper stage was known as the tiring house; it was concealed from the audience by a curtain which would be drawn back to reveal an inner stage, for such scenes as the witches' cave in Macbeth, Prospero's cell or Juliet's tomb.

There was no general curtain concealing the whole stage, so that all scenes on the main stage began with an entrance and ended with an exit. Thus in tragedies the dead must be carried away. There was no scenery, and therefore no limit to the number of scenes, for a scene came to an end when the characters left the stage. When it was necessary for the exact locality of a scene to be known, then Shakespeare



THE GLOBE THEATRE

*Wood-engraving by R. J. Beedham after a reconstruction by J. C. Adams*

indicated it in the dialogue; otherwise a simple property or a garment was sufficient; a chair or stool showed an indoor scene, a man wearing riding boots was a messenger, a king wearing armour was on the battlefield, or the like. Such simplicity was on the whole an advantage; the spectator was not distracted by the setting and Shakespeare was able to use as many scenes as he wished. The action passed by very quickly: a play of 2500 lines of verse could be acted in two hours. Moreover, since the actor was so close to his audience, the slightest subtlety of voice and gesture was easily appreciated.

The company was a 'Fellowship of Players', who were all partners and sharers. There were usually ten to fifteen full members, with three or four boys, and some paid servants. Shakespeare had therefore to write for his team. The chief actor in the company was Richard Burbage, who first distinguished himself as Richard III; for him Shakespeare wrote his great tragic parts. An important member of the company was the clown or low comedian. From 1594 to 1600 the company's clown was Will Kemp; he was succeeded by Robert Armin. No women were allowed to appear on the stage, and all women's parts were taken by boys.

## THE TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR

On 26th November 1607 Nathaniel Butter and John Busby entered in the Register of the Stationers' Company, and so claimed their right to print, 'A book called Master William Shakespeare his history of King Lear, as it was played before the King's Majesty at Whitehall upon Saint Stephen's night at Christmas last, by his majesty's servants playing usually at the Globe on the Bankside.' A few weeks later the play was on sale with a full and elaborate title page, as: 'Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Paul's Church-yard at the sign of the Pied Bull near St. Austin's Gate. 1608.'

*Lear* was thus acted at King James's Court in the Christmas holidays of 1606, and various evidences show that it was a recent play written whilst the vast apprehensions, gloom and horror caused by the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot and other alarms of the 'Black Year' were still fresh. One passage in particular is datable.

Gloucester's observations on 'these late eclipses in the sun and moon' which Edmund echoes a little later to Edgar [p. 36 l. 28 and p. 37 l. 27] have been taken to refer to notable eclipses of the moon and sun on 27th September and 2nd October 1605. Actually Shakespeare took these speeches from a little pamphlet called *Strange, fearful and true news which happened at Carlstadt in the Kingdom of Croatia*. It was translated from the High Dutch and told of terrible signs and portents, which (according to the editor, one Edward



Gresham, an almanack maker) were divine portents of threatening disaster.

'The Earth's and Moon's late and horrible obscurations, the frequent eclipsations of the fixed bodies; by the wandering, the fixed stars, I mean the planets, within these few years more than ordinary, shall without doubt (salved divine inhibition) have their effects no less admirable, than the positions unusual. Which PEUCER with many more too long to rehearse out of continual observation and the consent of all authors noted to be, new leagues, traitorous designments, catching at kingdoms, translation of empire, downfall of men in authority, emulations, ambition, innovations, factious sects, schisms and much disturbance and troubles in religion and matters of the Church, with many other things infallible in sequent such orbical positions and phenomenes.'

The preface to this work of a 'sectary astronomical' was dated 11 February 1606. The similarity of phrase, rhythm and sentiment is so close that it can hardly be accidental.

It is perhaps worth noting that on 29 March 1606 there was a tempest of exceptional violence which wrought great damage all over Europe. There is no trace of a storm in any of the other versions of the Lear story, or in the old play, and it is not perhaps too far fetched to suggest that the storm scenes in *King Lear* came to Shakespeare in that wild night.

Shakespeare took a few details from another book, to make up the vocabulary of Edgar when disguised as 'poor Tom the Bedlam beggar':

'... five fiends have been in poor Tom at once, of lust, as Obidicut, Hobbididance Prince of dumbness, Mahu of stealing, Modo of murder, Flibbertigibbet of mopping and