

INTRODUCTION

WHICH *KING LEAR*? THE TEXTS AND THEIR DATES

King Lear, a play about an unstable society, is itself an unstable text. For much of its theatrical history it has been adapted and altered, either because it was considered too difficult to perform as written or because it was felt to be artistically defective. It exists in two published versions (called a ‘History’ in 1608, a ‘Tragedy’ in 1623). The *Lear* published in 1623 differs from the earlier one in large ways – two scenes are omitted – and in a great many small ones, such as the spelling of characters’ names.¹ The reasons for these differences are still the subject of scholarly debate. The traditional view is that both derive from a common original and that the differences can be explained, on the one hand, by the incompetence of the printer in 1608 (he had never printed a play before) and, on the other, by alterations made by someone in the acting company and/or, later, by the editor employed to work on the massive 1623 Folio of Shakespeare’s collected plays.² Editors and directors who work on this assumption base their edition on both texts, making choices between them where they differ and thus producing what is really a third version.

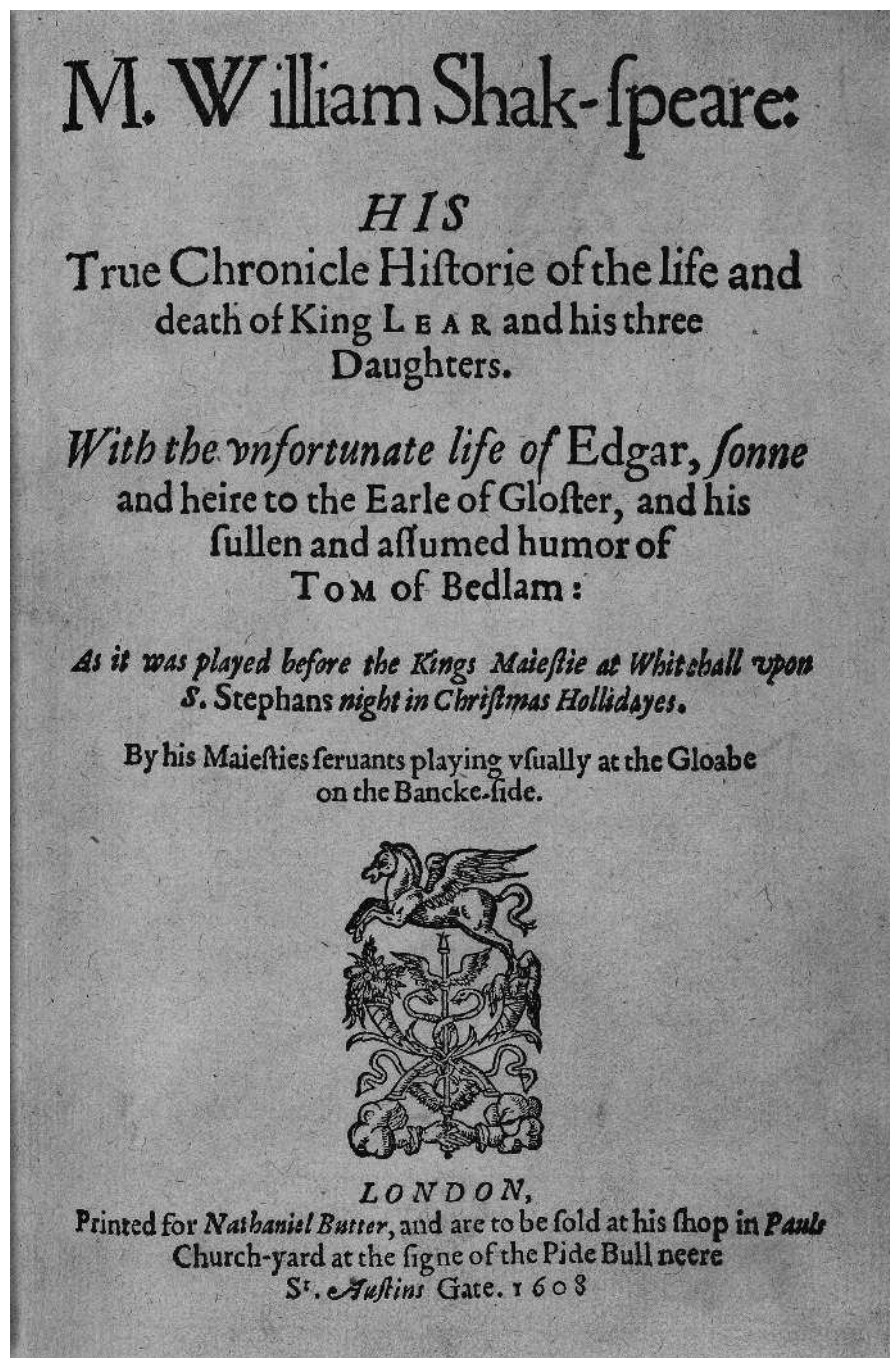
The other view is that the Folio represents Shakespeare’s revision of the quarto and that the two texts should be treated separately.³ However, the word ‘revision’ may be misleading, if it means the author’s later, perhaps final, view of the play. As Leah Marcus writes, ‘These are two “local” versions of *King Lear* among other possible versions which may have existed in manuscript, promptbook, or performance without achieving the fixity of print.’⁴ It is now recognized that plays were adapted for different occasions: they might be shortened for some performances and, for others, lengthened with songs and dances. For plays at court, actors were expected to be well dressed and spectacle was important, especially since some spectators, such as foreign ambassadors, would not know much English. Touring productions may have had fewer actors at their disposal; plays in private houses or at the Inns of Court (law schools) may have had their own requirements – for instance, long plays might have had a refreshment break in the middle. The early published versions of many of Shakespeare’s most popular plays – *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* – differ from the ones published in 1623. We do not know whether the *King Lear* seen at court late in 1606 resembled the one published in 1608, or in the Folio of 1623, or neither. Tests of vocabulary and diction in the new material have suggested that it

¹ The spelling of Edmond and Gonerill in this Introduction is that of the Folio, but quotations from other writers will often give the more conventional quarto spellings, Edmund and Goneril.

² Brian Vickers, *The One King Lear*, 2016. His argument is summarized on p. 328.

³ See the essays in *Division*, and many of those in James Ogden and Arthur H. Scouten (eds.), ‘*Lear*’ from *Study to Stage*, 1997. R. A. Foakes, ‘A shaping for *King Lear*’, the final chapter of his *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare’s Art*, 1993, is a close study of how, in his opinion, the alterations work.

⁴ Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare*, 1988, p. 151.

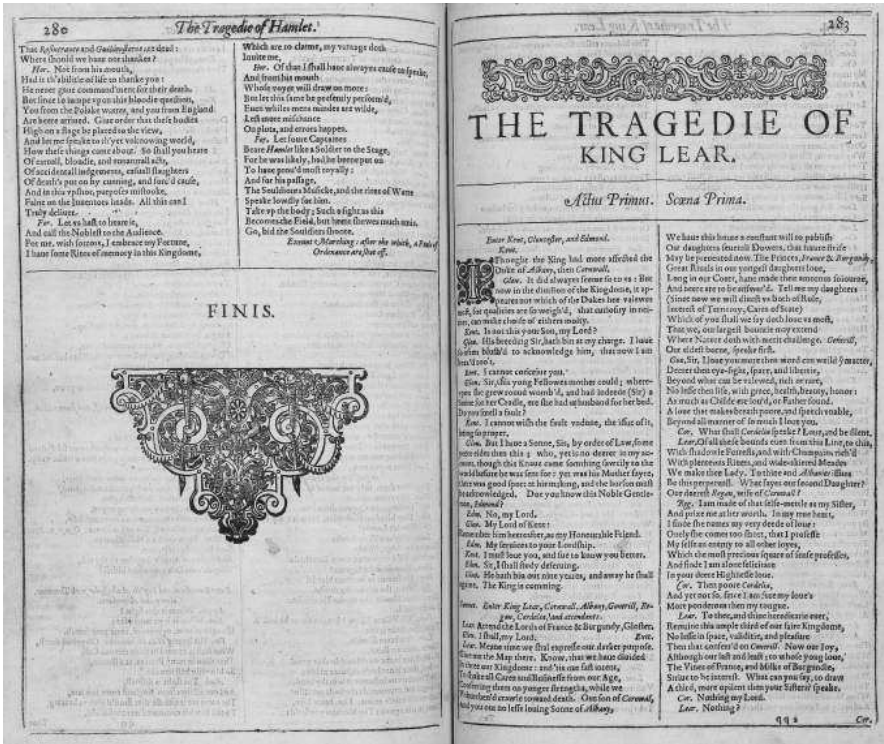


1 Title page of the 1608 quarto of *King Lear*. Leaf A4 recto: title page

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-19586-8 — The Tragedy of King Lear
 William Shakespeare, Introduction by Lois Potter, Edited by Jay Halio
 Excerpt
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2 First page of *King Lear* in the 1623 Folio. Leaf qq1 verso (page 280), leaf qq2 recto (page 283)

dates from around 1610, but the amount of text on which this conclusion is based is very small. Even if the changes were made around the time Shakespeare was writing *Cymbeline* (also based on early British history), the play remains an early Jacobean work rather than an example of ‘late Shakespeare’.¹

Whatever one thinks about the origins of the two texts, the argument for editing the quarto and Folio plays separately is that it enables readers to make their own decisions about the differences between them. This edition prints the text of the play as it appeared in the 1623 volume of *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*. The first New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of this play, by Jay L. Halio, included a full discussion of these two texts. A slightly shortened version is reprinted here, introduced by Brian Gibbons, and the reader who wants to know more about this complex subject should look to pp. 50–79, 249–72. Passages that exist only in the quarto are printed in an Appendix.

The play’s date is less controversial. It must be later than 1603, which is the publication date of one of its sources, Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (see p. 8, below). The title page of the play’s first edition says that

¹ See Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death*, 2007, pp. 294–313, for the idea that the two-text theory attracts those who want a play about old age to be a late play.

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it was performed at the court of James I at Whitehall on 26 December 1606. It is possible that this was its first performance, though it is more likely that the actors had already played it in public or private locations. Gloucester seems to assume that his onstage and offstage listeners will know what he means by ‘These late [recent] eclipses in the sun and moon’ (1.2.91); he may or may not be referring to the eclipses that had taken place in September and October 1605.

The play’s most important theatrical source is an earlier play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters*. This play (anonymous to us, but probably not to Shakespeare) could have been acted as early as 1589, and there are records of its performance at the Rose Theatre in April 1594 by a company that combined the personnel of two acting companies, the Queen’s Men and the Earl of Sussex’s Men. It was first entered into the Stationers’ Register in May 1594 (to establish ownership) but apparently not published; it was entered again in May 1605 and published later that year. Richard Knowles, who finds that *Lear* recalls *Leir* in ‘nearly a hundred significant details’, thinks that Shakespeare could have acquired such familiarity only from reading the published text and thus that his play must have been written mainly in 1606.¹ To many scholars, however, the echoes of *Leir*’s plot and language – which have been found in other Shakespeare plays as well – seem like the result of long acquaintance rather than recent skimming. Although there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever belonged to the Queen’s Men, several of their most popular plays became the basis for his own, and it remains possible that he saw or even acted in *Leir* when it was new.² The general view at present is that Shakespeare was probably writing *King Lear* in 1604–5 and planning *Macbeth* at about the same time.

EXPERIENCING THE PLAY

While *King Lear* is usually a gripping play in performance, it gets off to a difficult start. Its first scene, overloaded with characters and information, is difficult for an audience to take in. Actors notoriously find it difficult as well; Ian McKellen, who has played Lear several times, writes that he kept ‘saying to myself: Once upon a time there was a King with Three Daughters’ in order to believe in the improbable things he had to do.³ The initial dialogue between Kent and Gloucester emphasizes Gloucester’s two sons, legitimate and illegitimate, who are then forgotten for some 270 lines. Lear’s plan to divide his kingdom among his daughters and their husbands is apparently known at least to these two courtiers, but his idea of basing his division on a ‘love-test’ may be either a secret plan or a sudden inspiration on his part. It is difficult for the five prospective heirs to the kingdom (and Cordelia’s two suitors, who enter later) to

¹ Richard Knowles, ‘How Shakespeare knew *King Leir*’, *S.Sur.* 55 (2002), 12–35: 35. Knowles argues that Shakespeare is not known to have been part of the Queen’s Men, who owned the play, and must have known it only from reading the published text.

² For example, Jacqueline Pearson, ‘*Much Ado* and *King Leir*’, *N&Q* (April 1981), 128–9, and Alan Stewart, *Shakespeare’s Letters*, 2008, p. 215. For other parallels, see Meredith Skura, ‘What Shakespeare did with the Queen’s Men’s *King Leir* and when’, *S.Sur.* 36 (2010), 316–25, and Janet Clare on the *Leir* play in *Shakespeare’s Stage Traffic: Imitation, Borrowing, and Competition in Renaissance Theatre*, 2014, pp. 210–29.

³ Ian McKellen, ‘King Lear’, in Julian Curry, *Shakespeare on Stage*, II, London, 2017, p. 157.

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establish their characters and relationships in the few lines they are given. The love-test itself is an interpretive puzzle. The mood can be that of a lighthearted game, suddenly turning nasty when Cordelia refuses to play, or a deadly serious trial. Kent's interruption gives the audience something like an outside perspective on the action. Since France and Burgundy are said to have been courting Cordelia for a 'long' time (1.1.42), productions sometimes indicate, as the text does not, whether she (or Lear) has a preference for either of them. Her departure as the future Queen of France can feel like a fairytale ending, but her farewell warning and the brief, hasty exchange between Gonerill and Regan suggest that there is more to come.

When the action shifts to Gloucester's family and Edmond's plot, Gloucester's lament over the events at court keeps the Lear story in view. It also helps Edmond's deception, since the old man thinks he sees a parallel between Lear's unnatural treatment of his daughter and Edgar's supposed plot against his father. The audience's first look at Edgar is too brief to establish him as a counterweight to the attractive Edmond, whose plot takes effect with amazing speed. The action moves, like Lear, to the house of Gonerill and Albany, where Lear's stipulation that he should always be attended by a hundred knights is infuriating Gonerill. Kent, disguised as a servant, is taken on by Lear and at once has a confrontation with Gonerill's confidential servant Oswald. The Fool – the only major character not already seen – makes a surprise entrance and immediately dominates the stage. His increasingly bitter songs and jokes emphasize the breakdown of Lear's relation with Gonerill, which reaches a climax when Lear calls down a curse on his daughter and storms out of her house. Act 1 (the Folio *Lear*, unlike the quarto, is divided into acts and scenes) ends with a short conversation between Gonerill and her bewildered husband Albany, whose allegiance is still unclear; Oswald and Kent are sent, separately, with letters to Regan; and the Fool tries to amuse the unhappy Lear and the audience before setting off with him to visit the second daughter. It is not clear whether Lear's palace and the houses of Gonerill, Regan, and Gloucester are imagined as near each other.

From Act 2 onwards, everyone seems constantly on the move. Edgar is tricked by Edmond into fleeing from Gloucester's house and is at once replaced by Regan and Cornwall, who have abandoned their own residence for reasons which at this point are obscure. They proceed to make themselves at home in Gloucester's, even adopting Edmond in the process. Another confrontation between Kent and Oswald, which at first seems unmotivated, leads to Kent's humiliating punishment in the stocks. Significantly (see note to 2.2.156), he probably remains visible, supposedly at Gloucester's house, during the soliloquy in which Edgar, who has just fled from there, explains his intended disguise as an insane beggar. When Lear arrives, it finally becomes clear that Oswald's arrival with a letter from Gonerill not only interrupted Kent's delivery of Lear's letter but also made Regan and Cornwall leave home at once. Lear has somehow learned of Regan's whereabouts and come to Gloucester's house, where, furious at the treatment of his messenger, he confronts Regan and Cornwall. When Gonerill arrives, and all three join forces against him, he is overwhelmed by the collapse of the world he thought he knew. Again, he rushes out of a house, this time saying, 'I abjure all roofs' (2.4.201).

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Act 3, an extraordinary piece of writing, divides the characters into those outside in the storm and those who remain indoors. On the Elizabethan stage, all this movement would be indicated by long entrances and exits through the doors at the back of the stage. Thunder and lightning provide a background against which human voices can be hard to hear. Kent and the Fool have managed to find Lear; when they try to enter a shelter, they are confronted by the disguised Edgar as Poor Tom, mankind reduced to its lowest possible level, and the sight precipitates Lear's descent into madness. Gloucester finds somewhere for them to go *in*, but almost at once returns to warn them to go *out* again, carrying the sleeping Lear. The Fool is never seen again. Running parallel to the scenes of Lear's madness are the quieter ones in Gloucester's house, where Edmond betrays his father. The blinding of Gloucester (3.7) is the most shocking event of the play, but also a turning point. Cornwall's servant, revolted by the act, kills his master; Gloucester finally learns the truth about his two sons. But the servant himself is killed and Gloucester's knowledge only adds to his wretchedness. Most productions put the interval either just before or just after this scene, as Gloucester is thrown out of his own house.

In Act 4, everyone seems to be converging on Dover, but characters frequently meet each other on the way in unspecified locations. When Edgar leads his blinded father onto the stage, the audience, like Gloucester, has to take his word that they are approaching Dover Cliff. Gloucester attempts suicide by jumping from it but Edgar has deceived him (and perhaps some of the audience) in the hope of curing his despair. Lear rejoins them, but the dialogue between mad king and blind man, another high point of the play, ends abruptly when Lear runs away from the soldiers sent by Cordelia to rescue him. Meanwhile, short scenes have indicated the crumbling of the alliance among Lear's enemies: Albany is estranged from Gonerill; Cornwall's death has made Regan a dangerous rival for Edmond's love. Gloucester has a price on his head, so Oswald, now travelling with a letter from Gonerill to Edmond, tries to kill the old man. He is killed by Edgar, who discovers the incriminating documents that he was carrying. The act ends with the great scene in which Lear awakes in Cordelia's presence, gradually recognizes her, and asks her forgiveness. Like her departure for France in 1.1, her insistence that she has nothing to forgive seems about to bring the story to a happy ending.

Throughout the first four acts, there has been talk of war, first between Albany and Cornwall, then between France and England – or, rather, between supporters of Lear, helped by a French army, and the armies of Albany and Edmond, who has replaced Cornwall as general. Act 5 finally brings the battle that everyone has been expecting, and, as often noted, it is an anticlimax. Possibly Shakespeare was avoiding the dramatization of a French invasion of England; possibly this part of the play depended on spectacle that would have been worked out in rehearsal rather than recorded in the text. Modern productions often depict the battle only through sound effects, heard by the blind Gloucester. He is finally led away by Edgar, who has seen the defeat of Lear's forces.

Unlike the battle, the trial by combat between Edgar and Edmond ends with victory for the 'right' side and with the one genuinely effective revelation in the play – 'My name is Edgar, and thy father's son' (5.3.159). But Edmond's defeat, which leads to the

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exposure and death of Gonerill, shows evil destroying itself (Gonerill has already poisoned Regan). Albany has the women's bodies brought on stage to make this visible for the audience and the other characters. Edmond belatedly tries to undo his worst action, ordering the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, and is taken to die, like his father, offstage. The subplot is finished, and Edgar remains as an appalled spectator when Lear's entrance with the dead Cordelia shows that there will be no victory for good. As in the opening scene, the king is with his daughters, urging Cordelia to speak. Perhaps, as he dies, he thinks she is about to answer him, but the meaning of his last words is mysterious. A sense of exhaustion hangs over the survivors. Albany, technically the heir to the throne, apparently attempts to divide his kingdom between Kent and Edgar (but does 'rule in this realm' mean the whole of Britain, or only part of it?). Neither explicitly consents (unless the 'we' in Edgar's final speech is a royal we). Kent exits, saying that he will follow Lear in death, and the concluding couplets may be deliberately flat. What do we feel? What ought we to say?

Contexts

PUBLIC EVENTS

James I had arrived from Scotland in the summer of 1603. *King Lear*, like *Macbeth*, belongs to the period when Shakespeare and his colleagues were looking for the right kind of play for a new king and a new court. This meant, among other things, a movement away from English history, in which the Scots often figured as villains, and towards 'British' or classical history, likely to be more familiar not only to the Scots but also to visiting foreign dignitaries. The play's apparently casual opening line – 'I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall' – must have attracted attention at the court performance in 1606, since the king's sons, Henry and Charles, had recently been given these titles. In the play, they apparently refer to Scotland and Wales (with England presumably intended as Cordelia's portion), though the exact boundaries are left deliberately vague. But Gloucester's reply, with its reference to 'the division of the kingdom' (1.1.3–4), would have been still more significant. James's reuniting of the crowns of England and Scotland had already been celebrated officially; the play will show its audience the fatal moment at which Britain was divided. The word 'British', as used in *Lear*, not only refers to the period in which the play is set but also has topical significance. James wanted to unite his kingdom under the name of 'Great Britain' – something that would not officially happen for another 100 years.¹ Albany was Prince Charles's Scottish title, and the Duke of Albany is given the play's last lines in the quarto, perhaps foreshadowing Scotland's later importance; the lines were given to Edgar in the Folio, perhaps because this point no longer needed to be made.

¹ See James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*, 2015, pp. 48–9. Though it has been suggested that the opening line refers to James's preference of one son over the other, the boys were only 12 and 6 at the time of the court performance. In *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, 1989, pp. 106–7, Annabel Patterson argues that *Lear* offered a thinly veiled critique of James I's love of hunting and his fondness for his court fool, as well as his self-justifying rhetoric.

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Leah Marcus has pointed out that St Stephen's Night, when the play was given at court, was associated with hospitality and charity (it was the day when poor boxes in churches were broken open and the money distributed to the poor). The fact that the 1608 title page makes a point of the performance date might, she thinks, alert readers to a way of reading the play, with its references to beggars and the homeless.¹ The version printed in 1623 does not make this connection, since the Folio, though it emphasizes Shakespeare's close relationship with the King's Men, omits references to performance conditions. Published twenty years after James's accession (and only two years before his death), the Folio *Lear* was already becoming a less topical work.

The public theatres were closed because of plague between 5 October and 15 December 1605, and November saw the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament – the result of the disappointment and anger of some Roman Catholics who had hoped that the change of reigns might lead to greater toleration for their religion. In the circumstances, it is unlikely that Shakespeare could have finished the play, or that his company could have rehearsed it, in time for the Christmas season of court performances in 1605–6. Even without this traumatic event, religion was a major topic of discussion at the time of *Lear*'s first performance. The king's reign had begun with a conference about religion at Hampton Court (January 1604), and the commissioning of a new translation of the Bible. The measures that Gloucester takes to keep Edgar from leaving the country ('All ports I'll bar': 2.1.79) are like those taken against the plotters and their supporters.

One of the play's odder sources, Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, is an anti-Catholic polemic. The author revisits an episode of 1585–6, recently investigated again, in which Roman Catholic priests had claimed to exorcise servants suffering from demonic possession. He argues that the susceptible servants, mainly women, had been led to give spectacular accounts of their sufferings by the suggestions of their interrogators. It was from this book that Shakespeare took the names of the devils by whom 'Poor Tom' claims to have been possessed, and the situation of the servants in their chair (something Harsnett insists on several times) may have helped to create the awful image of Gloucester bound to a chair and tortured. The name Edmund (or Edmunds) occurs frequently in Harsnett's account; however, both Edmund and Edgar were also the names of kings before the Norman Conquest.

In 1603–4, there had been a curious parallel to the story of *Lear*. The elderly Sir Brian Annesley had three daughters, though only two were involved in the legal battle over whether he was too senile to be allowed to act for himself; the one who argued that his wishes deserved respect was, significantly, named Cordell. When Sir Brian died in 1604, one of the executors of his will was a man probably known to Shakespeare, Sir William Harvey, husband of the Countess of Southampton, who later married Cordell himself (her father had left her everything). It is not likely that this episode inspired Shakespeare's play, or even the name of the heroine, since there are other sources for both, but Shakespeare may have been struck by the way in which life sometimes imitated art.

¹ Marcus, *Puzzling*, pp. 153–4.

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LITERARY AND THEATRICAL INFLUENCES

Knowing the sources of *Lear* is perhaps as close as one can ever come to observing the creative process by which Shakespeare made his play. It can also help to avoid unnecessary questions, such as, ‘Why doesn’t Cordelia just tell her father what he wants to hear?’ The basic starting point – the king who asks his three daughters to say how much they love him – was not Shakespeare’s invention. Many cultures have a story about someone who asks his three children how much they love him, fails to appreciate the honest answer of (always) the youngest one, and eventually realizes that she or he was right.

The ‘chronicle histories’ that served as sources for many plays in the 1590s tended to make up for the absence of hard facts with traditional anecdotes, especially for the poorly documented earlier periods. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in *Historica Anglica* (c. 1135), was the first to connect the love-test with the division of the kingdom, and to ascribe it to a King Lear. There was no historical Leir or Lear: his name may have been invented to explain the name of the town of Leicester, interpreted as the Roman fort (*caster*) of Leir (compare Old King Cole, supposedly resident at Colchester). According to Geoffrey, Cordelia led an army that restored Lear to his throne, and became queen after his death. Later, her sisters’ children rebelled and threw her into prison, where she hanged herself. This story is retold in *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), published under the name of Raphael Holinshed. This was probably Shakespeare’s main source but he could also have read a condensed account in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590). Another popular work was *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1574), a series of verse monologues by various writers in which the ghosts of famous people describe their miserable fates. It includes Cordelia’s account of her imprisonment and suicide.

By calling itself *The True Chronicle History*, the anonymous *Leir* play acknowledges its indebtedness to sources like these, but gives events a romantic and folkloric turn, ending with Leir’s restoration to his throne. Tolstoy, in a famous essay, said that it was superior to Shakespeare’s version.¹ Certainly, it tells its story more clearly than Shakespeare does, partly because it has no subplot. Although there is no Fool, there are a number of comic characters and scenes; despite some harrowing and pathetic moments, there is rarely much doubt that the story will end happily and that virtue will be rewarded.

In the *Leir* play, as in Holinshed, all three daughters are unmarried at the beginning, but the love-test is designed to trap Cordella, who has said that she wants to marry for love: once she professes her love, Leir plans to make her prove it by marrying the man of his choice. Since the two older sisters have already been tipped off that their father plans to marry them to the men they prefer, they have no hesitation in expressing unconditional love and obedience; Cordella, however, defeats his plan by refusing to flatter him. The king of ‘Gallia’ (France – but the name perhaps emphasizes how long ago all this is happening) visits England in disguise in order to find out whether

¹ ‘Tolstoy on Shakespeare: A critical essay on Shakespeare’ (translated from the Russian by V. Tchertkoff and I. F. M.), published as a preface to Ernest Crosby’s *Shakespeare’s Attitude to the Working Classes* (1907). This essay is easiest to find on the internet, in the online transcription by Project Gutenberg.

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3 Thomas Trevelyon, Leire and Cordila [*Trevelyon Miscellany*], 1608. Folio 73 verso