



The Tragedie of King Lear

William Shakespeare

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'King Lear,' in which Shakespeare's tragic genius moved without any faltering on Titanic heights, was written during 1606, and was produced before the Court at Whitehall on the night of December 26 of that year. It was entered on the 'Stationers' Registers' on November 26, 1607, and two imperfect editions, published by Nathaniel Butter, appeared in the following year; neither exactly corresponds with the other or with the improved and fairly satisfactory text of the Folio. The three versions present three different playhouse transcripts. Like its immediate predecessor, 'Macbeth,' the tragedy was mainly founded on Holinshed's 'Chronicle.' The leading theme had been dramatised as early as 1593, but Shakespeare's attention was no doubt directed to it by the publication of a crude dramatic adaptation of Holinshed's version in 1605 under the title of 'The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three Daughters—Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella.' Shakespeare did not adhere closely to his original. He invested the tale of Lear with a hopelessly tragic conclusion, and on it he grafted the equally distressing tale of Gloucester and his two sons, which he drew from Sidney's 'Arcadia.' Hints for the speeches of Edgar when feigning madness were drawn from Harsnet's 'Declaration of Popish Impostures,' 1603. In every act of 'Lear' the pity and terror of which tragedy is capable reach their climax. Only one who has something of the Shakespearean gift of language could adequately characterise the scenes of agony—the living martyrdom—to which the fiendish ingratitude of his daughters condemns the abdicated king—'a very foolish, fond old man, fourscore and upward.' The elemental passions burst forth in his utterances with all the vehemence of the volcanic tempest which beats about his defenceless head in the scene on the heath. The brutal blinding of Gloucester by Cornwall exceeds in horror any other situation that Shakespeare created, if we assume that he was not responsible for the like scenes of mutilation in 'Titus Andronicus.' At no point in 'Lear' is there any loosening of the tragic tension. The faithful half-witted lad who serves the king as his fool plays the jesting chorus on his master's fortunes in penetrating earnest and deepens the desolating pathos.

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