

History of Lear (Quarto)

INTRODUCTION

King Lear first appeared in print in a quarto of 1608. A substantially different text appeared in the 1623 Folio. Until now, editors, assuming that each of these early texts imperfectly represented a single play, have conflated them. But research conducted mainly during the 1970s and 1980s confirms an earlier view that the 1608 quarto represents the play as Shakespeare originally wrote it, and the 1623 Folio as he substantially revised it. He revised other plays, too, but usually by making many small changes in the dialogue and adding or omitting passages, as in *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Othello*. For these plays we print the revised text in so far as it can be ascertained. But in *King Lear* revisions are not simply local but structural, too; conflation, as Harley Granville-Barker wrote, 'may make for redundancy or confusion', so we print an edited version of each text. The first, printed in the following pages, represents the play as Shakespeare first conceived it, probably before it was performed.

The story of a king who, angry with the failure of his virtuous youngest daughter (Cordelia) to respond as he desires in a love-test, divides his kingdom between her two malevolent sisters (Gonoril and Regan), had been often told; Shakespeare would have come upon it in Holinshed's *Chronicles* and in *A Mirror for Magistrates* while reading for his plays on English history. It is told also (though briefly) in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (Book 2, canto 10), and had been dramatized in a play of unknown authorship±±*The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters*±±published in 1605, but probably written some fifteen years earlier. This play particularly gave Shakespeare much, including suggestions for the characters of Lear's loyal servant, Kent, and of Gonoril's husband, Albany, and her steward, Oswald; for the storm; for Lear's kneeling to Cordelia; and for many details of language. Nevertheless, his play is a highly original creation. Lear's madness and the harrowing series of disasters in *King Lear*'s final stages are of Shakespeare's invention, and he complicates the plot by adding the story

(based on an episode of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*) of Gloucester and his two sons, Edmund and Edgar. Edgar's love and loyalty to the father who, failing to see the truth, has rejected him in favour of the villainous Edmund makes him a counterpart to Cordelia; and the horrific blinding of Gloucester brought about by Edmund creates a physical parallel to Lear's madness which reaches its consummation in the scene (Sc. 20) at Dover Cliff when the mad and the blind old men commune together.

The clear-eyed intensity of Shakespeare's tragic vision in *King Lear* has been too much for some audiences, and Nahum Tate's adaptation, which gave the play a happy ending, held the stage from 1681 to 1843; since then, increased understanding of Shakespeare's stagecraft along with a greater seriousness in theatre audiences has assisted in the rehabilitation of a play that is now recognized as one of the profoundest of all artistic explorations of the human condition.