



The Tragedie of King Lear

King Lear can be dated between 1590 (the publication of Sidney's *Arcadia*) and 1606, when it was performed at court. I, 133, to 1619):

Publication Date

The play was entered in the Stationers' Register on 26 November 1607 by Nathaniel Butter and John Busby:

[SR] 26 Novembris. Nathanael Butter John Busby. Entred for their Copie under thandes of Sir George Buck knight and Thwardens A booke called. Master William Shakespeare his historye of Kinge Lear, as yt was played before the kinges maiestie at Whitehall vpon Sainct Stephans night at christmas Last, by his maiesties seruantes playenge vsually at the globe on Banksyde vj^d

The first quarto was published in 1608, printed by Nicholas Okes for Butter:

[Q1] M. William Shak-speare: HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters. *With the vnfortunate* life of Edgar, *sonne* and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam: *As it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall vpon S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes.* By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe on the Bancke-side. London, Printed [by Nicholas Okes] 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.

The second quarto is also dated 1608, although it was not printed until 1619 (one of the Pavier collection of ten plays, dated by Chambers, *WS*,

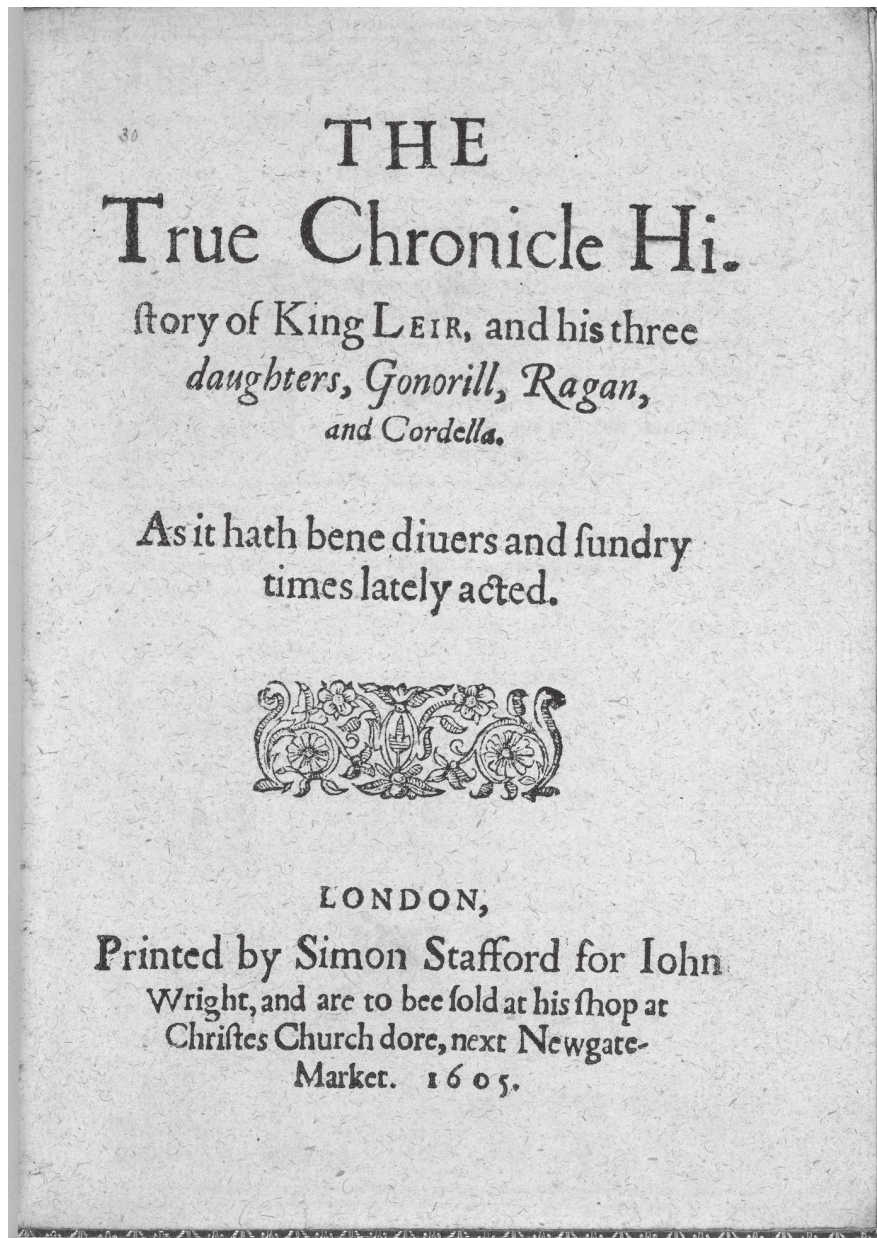
[Q2] M. William Shake-speare, his true chronicle history of the life and death of King Lear, and his three daughters. With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloucester, and his sullen and assumed humour of Tom of Bedlam. As it was plaied before the Kings Maiesty at White-hall, vpon S. Stephens night, in Christmas hollidaies. By his Maiesties seruants, playing vsually at the Globe on the Banck-side. [London]: Printed [by William Jaggard] for Nathaniel Butter, 1608 [i.e. 1619].

Q2 was printed from the shorter Q1, but includes many changes, introduces corrections, and creates some further errors.

In the First Folio of 1623, the title is changed from "history" to "tragedy", and the folio text differs from Q1 in numerous details, some substantial. It lacks nearly 300 lines found in Q1, and has more than 100 lines not found in the quarto. Wells & Taylor in *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* print both versions, arguing that Q1 and F1 were based on different copies, a decision which has subsequently been accepted by most editors, e.g. Foakes. Halio does not attempt to conflate the two texts but believes that they have equal authority, Q derived from Shakespeare's rough drafts, F derived from a manuscript used in the playhouses during the seventeenth century.¹

Performance Dates

There was a performance before King James on 26 December 1606 (mentioned in the Stationers' Register in the 1607 entry). There is only one other record of a performance before the Restoration:



The title page to the anonymous quarto of *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, 1605. It has generally been believed that this play was by another author but some scholars have argued that it was an early version by Shakespeare, which he later revised into *King Lear*.

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the play was performed in 1610 at Gowthwaite Hall, Nidderdale, Yorkshire.² on 14 May 1594:

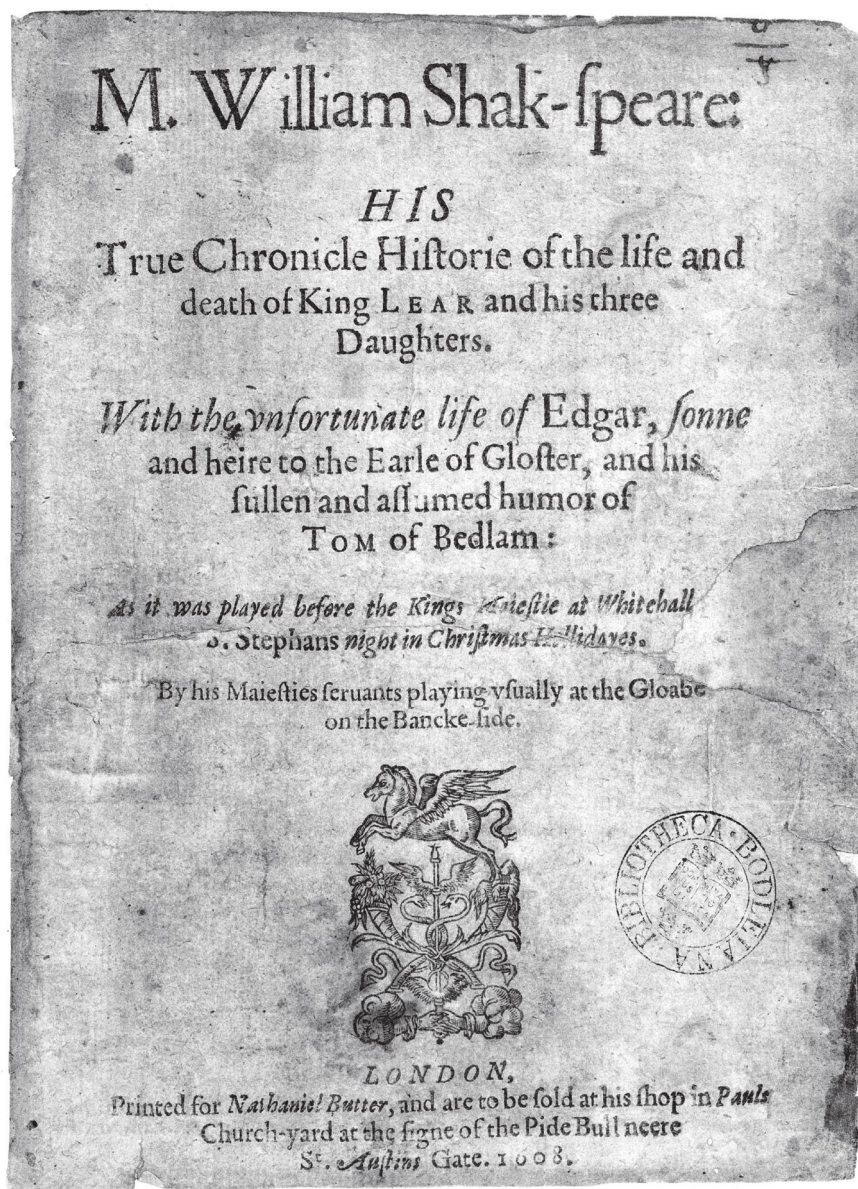
Relationship between *Leir* and *Lear*

There has been much debate and little agreement between scholars over the relationship between an anonymous play *The Chronicle of King Leir* and Shakespeare's play in Q1 and F1 above.

Adam Islip recorded in the Stationers' Register

[SR 1594] The moste famous Chronicle historye of LEIRE king of England and his Three Daughters

Islip's name was subsequently crossed out and the name of Edward White, a fellow stationer, was added. The play was not published at this time and it was registered again on 8 May 1605 by Simon Stafford:



The title page to the First Quarto of *Chronicle History of King Lear*, 1608. For a long time in the twentieth century, it was generally believed that this was an inferior version, derived from the Folio text. More recently, the consensus has been that this play was an early version by Shakespeare, which he later revised. By permission of Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, shelfmark Arch. G d.42 TP (6), title page.

[SR 1605] the Tragecall historie of kinge LEIR and his Three Daughters

It was printed later in the year by Simon Stafford for John Wright:

[Q] The true Chronicle History of King Leir and his three daughters, *Gonorill, Ragan and Cordella*. As it hath bene divers and sundry times lately acted. LONDON, Printed by Simon Stafford for John Wright, and are to bee sold at his shop at Christes Church dore, next Newgate Market. 1605.

There was no further edition.

Various authors have been suggested for *The Chronicle of King Leir*, including Kyd, Greene, Peele, Lodge, Munday and Shakespeare.³

It is generally assumed that the ownership of *The Chronicle of King Leir* passed from the Queen's Men to the Chamberlain's Men and then to the King's Men, where it was rewritten by Shakespeare. Henslowe recorded that *Kinge Leare* was performed by a cast drawn from both the Queen's Men and the Sussex Men at the Rose Theatre on 6 and 8 April 1594. Chambers

suggests that this is the anonymous *Chronicle of King Leir* and that the play was in the repertory of the Queen's Men. In May 1594, the Queen's Men gave up playing in London and sold a number of their plays to other companies. The Lord Chamberlain's Men began in 1594 with "a repertory derived from inheritance or purchase from antecedent companies" (Chambers). The Chamberlain's Men were re-formed as the King's Men in 1603.

Cairncross, however, argues that there was another play about King Lear in the 1590s, as the copyright of *King Leir* (asserted in the SR of 1594) remained with the Edward White family from 1594 until 29 June 1624 when *Leire and his daughters* was transferred from White's widow to E. Alde. Since there is no possibility of Edward White and the Lord Chamberlain's Men sharing the ownership of one single play, he argues that there must have been two separate plays in the 1590s, one of which was Shakespeare's.

Sources

There are over forty versions of the story of King Lear, starting (as noted by Muir in 1966: xxxvi) with that of Hugh of Huntingdon in 1139. His tale is included in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577); Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596) describes how Lear gives all his land away.⁴ In the *Arcadia* (1590) Philip Sidney introduces Gloucester and his sons. The anonymous play *The Chronicle of King Leir* (registered in 1594, but dated by Greg and Bullough c. 1590) is taken as a source by most scholars, who view it as by another hand. Some see *The Chronicle of King Leir* as an early version of Shakespeare's play. Wiggins dates *Leir* (which he somewhat confusingly calls *King Lear and his daughters*) to c. 1589.

Orthodox Dates

Chambers proposed 1605 as the date of composition of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the date 1605–6 has generally found acceptance. Wiggins dates this play to Shakespeare's version to 1605 in a best guess, with revision by 1610 "when there is an otherwise unexplained gap in Shakespeare's output" (V:253). Foakes comments: "There is no direct evidence to show when it was

written or first performed" (1997: 89–90). They agree that *King Lear* as we know it could not have been written before John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* (1603) and the publication of Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (also 1603). The Montaigne translation is seen as important because Florio and Shakespeare sometimes use similar words and phrases and the play contains elements of Montaigne's sceptical philosophy. Harsnett is significant because the Mad Tom scenes contain references to devils such as Frateretto, Flibbertigibbet, Mahu, Modo and Smulkin, which are mentioned in the *Declaration*.

Gloucester's references to "these late eclipses of the sun and moon" (1.2.90) is usually taken to refer to the two such eclipses in September and October 1605; but such co-occurrences were also recorded in July 1590, February 1598 and November/December 1601.⁵

Cairncross defies the consensus by dating Shakespeare's play between 1590 and 1594.

Oxfordian Dates

Clark suggests various historical parallels and writes that the "historic allusions in *King Lear* all point to 1589 or 1590" (1974: 887).

External Oxfordian Evidence

Shakespeare is often presented as a follower rather than a leader in the cultural richness of the Elizabethan age. Foakes, puts it thus: "it often seems to be taken for granted that Shakespeare never invented when he could borrow, and searching for the 'sources' of Shakespeare's plays has long been a minor scholarly industry" (1997: 92–93). He continues: "the philosophical, religious, social and political issues can rarely be traced to a particular source; for the most part it is more helpful to think in terms of influences or contexts". However, Foakes does think (1997: 93) that perhaps the only degree of certainty in dating the composition of the play "is that Shakespeare could not have written it" before the publication of Harsnett and of Florio's translation of Montaigne, both published in 1603.

Montaigne's work was published in France in 1580, 1588, and in 1595. Oxford was an

accomplished scholar, could read and speak French fluently, had easy access to libraries, and purchased important books (Nelson: 53). He could read Montaigne in the original long before Florio's 1603 translation. Montaigne would also have been read by other scholars in the original, and his ideas and philosophy would have been known by many before Florio's translation.

Harsnett offers a far more revealing and interesting challenge because of the many references and phrases found in *King Lear* that are also found in his *Declaration*. Orthodoxy has continued to take this as proof that *King Lear* was written after 1603, whereas, as long ago as 1965, Gwyneth Bowen showed that there is evidence in Harsnett that anyone could have had access to much of the information and phraseology in the *Declaration* long before 1603. How many modern Shakespearean commentators have read Harsnett?

The exorcisms exposed in the *Declaration* took place between 1585 and 1586. It was to be a busy year! From May 1586 the exorcists began to be arrested. In August 1586 the Babington Plot arrests were made. And in October 1586 Mary Queen of Scots was tried and sentenced to death by a tribunal on which the Earl of Oxford served. Oxford was therefore at the centre of events and would have been well aware of the activities and arrests of exorcists.

Harsnett's own main source was what he called the *Miracle Booke*. This turned up in 1594, when an intrepid Catholic named Robert Barnes was arrested. He was jailed and in 1598 wrote to Robert Cecil about a "book of exorcisms" found on him at his arrest and being displayed to people by his jailor. Barnes claimed he had only made a copy at the request of a friend. The book was passed on to Bishop Bancroft and Harsnett. This is the *Miracle Booke* from which Harsnett quotes so lavishly.

Harsnett wrote as follows:

And that this declaration may be free from the carpe and cavill of ill-affected, or decomposed spirits, I have alledged nothing for materiall, or authentically herein, but the expresse words eyther of some part of the *Miracle booke*, penned by the priests and filed upon Record, where it is publique to be seene, or els a clause of theyr confessions who were fellow actors in this impious dissimulation.

The *Miracle Booke*, along with witnesses' depositions, became part of the archives of Ecclesiastical Court of the High Commission. Alas, that archive was destroyed during the Civil War. There would have been several copies of the various parts of the work; perhaps one day another copy or version will come to light. Be that as it may, we do know that the *Miracle Booke*, in one version or another, was in circulation before 1594, that no small part of the *Declaration* was taken from it, and that Oxford (if Shakespeare) would not have had to wait until 1603 before writing his Mad Tom sequences.

Apart from Oxford's involvement in events involving Catholics in 1580, there is yet another remarkable coincidence. In the *Declaration*, Harsnett mentions eighteen times that Lord Vaux's house in Hackney, called King's Place, was one of the locations of the exorcisms. Lord Vaux was a recusant who, in 1580, had offered asylum to Edmund Campion and later sheltered many others. He was financially ruined by his recusancy and died in 1595. In 1596, King's Place was transferred to Oxford's second wife, Elizabeth Trentham, who allowed Lady Vaux to continue to live in the house. Before this, Oxford and his new wife had been living in Stoke Newington, the parish adjacent to Hackney, ever since his second marriage in 1591, and they were very possibly friendly with the Vaux, who might well have held a copy of the *Miracle Booke*.

Another possible reference concerns what is usually known as the Annesley case. Brian Annesley, an aged and long-serving court servant, made his will in 1601, giving the bulk of his property to his youngest and unmarried daughter Cordell who lived with him. The two older married sisters received considerably less. In 1603 he became senile and one of the married and less well-off sisters, Grace, attempted to have him committed. Cordell opposed the move and successfully appealed to Robert Cecil to allow a friend to take charge of her father's financial affairs.

Duncan-Jones regrets the fact that most scholars "have played down the relevance of the Annesley case". She is convinced that the Annesley case "was the immediate trigger for both the revival of the old *Leir*, on stage and in print, and for Shakespeare's radical re-writing of it on behalf of the King's Men" (2001: 187).

Duncan-Jones is mainly persuaded because of the “extraordinary coincidence” that Annesley’s third daughter was called Cordell (187). It is difficult to follow her reasoning as *King Leir* has Goorill, Ragan and Cordella; Holinshed has Gonorilla, Regan and Cordeilla, and Edmund Spenser offers Gonorill, Regan and Cordeill. The argument of Duncan-Jones ignores also the probability that the *King Leir* play registered by Edward White in 1594 and the *Kinge Leare* performed by the Queen’s Men in 1594 were two different plays.

Conclusion

The early 1590s seems most likely as the date of first composition of the play. The much more generally accepted later dating depends upon the relevant works of Montaigne and Harsnett being unavailable prior to 1603; but, as we have seen above, both were, in fact, available earlier than 1603.

We have a Henslowe entry noting two performances in 1594. These are without the name of Shakespeare, but many plays began life anonymously and Henslowe never mentioned the name ‘Shakespeare’ or any of its variants. The Henslowe *Kinge Leare* of 1594 could well have incorporated passages based on the writings of Spenser, Sidney, Montaigne, and the passages Harsnett extracted from the *Miracle Booke*.⁶

Notes

1. Halio (2005: 58–74) has an extended discussion on the alternative theories proffered since the dismissal of “early theories” which “held that [the Q text]... was a reported text of some kind, a version of the play taken down from memory (‘memorial reconstruction’) or by shorthand by someone in the theatre” (59). Halio identifies Steven Urkowitz’s study, *Shakespeare’s Revision of ‘King Lear’*, as the first successfully to disprove theories of “memorial contamination”, concluding that “Q was printed directly from Shakespeare’s drafts and not from a transcript of them” (61), thereby restoring the Q text to a position of authority. Lawrie Maguire in *Shakespeare’s Suspect Texts* (1996) gives a detailed argument for the same conclusion.
2. C. J. Sisson reported this performance in *Lost*

Plays of Shakespeare’s Age (1936: 4), having examined the records of the recusancy trials in Yorkshire. Wells and Taylor note that, as the record refers to *King Lere*, this might have been either *King Leir* or *King Lear*, since both versions were in print by 1610.

3. See Logan & Smith (1973: 219–20).
4. Foakes (1997: 95–6) suggests that it is probable that Shakespeare knew Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* where in Book 2, Canto 10, “a chronicle of British kings includes a brief rehearsal of the story of Leyr and his daughters which includes two variants from the traditional narrative that had an influence on *King Lear*.” These Foakes identifies as the revision of the name Cordeilla into Cordelia and the specificity of Spenser’s version of Cordelia’s death. In Spenser, Cordelia hangs herself (2006: 252) and in *King Lear*, Edmund orders that Cordelia be hanged (In the F text, 5.3.226–30; in the Q text, 5.3.248–51).
5. H. H. Furness. *Shakespeare: King Lear*, New Variorum edition 1880, p. 369.
6. Details and descriptions of Oxford’s life can be found in Nelson: his knowledge of French (37), at the trial of Mary, Queen of Scots (302–3), his inclination towards Catholicism (248–59), his move to King’s Place, Hackney (368) and his acquaintance with Holinshed (90–92). Stephen Greenblatt questions the direction of influence between Harsnett and *King Lear*. In “Shakespeare and the Exorcists” in J. L. Halio (ed.), *Critical Essays on Shakespeare’s King Lear*. New York, 1996, Greenblatt writes “When Shakespeare borrows from Harsnett, who knows if Harsnett has not already, in a deep sense, borrowed from Shakespeare’s theatre what Shakespeare borrows back?”

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