

The Two Lear Plays How Shakespeare Transformed His First Romance into His Last Tragedy

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By the late sixteenth century more than fifty chroniclers and poets had produced versions of a fable that first appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century *Historia Regum Britanniae*—the story of the British king who decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Shakespeare's two versions (1608, 1623) are perhaps the clearest example of his transformation of a simple and thinly-drawn apprenticeship play into one of the masterpieces of the canon. In none of the four other wholesale revisions of his early plays does he so completely rethink and rewrite a story so as to change its genre, its message and its outcome.



King Leir and his Daughters, the *Northumberland Bestiary*, c.1250

It is accepted with little dissent among orthodox scholars that Shakespeare knew the earlier *King Leir* (1594) and based his own play on its plot and characters. Most also agree that when he composed *King Lear* he used or modified words, phrases, ideas, and dramatic devices from the old play.¹ In fact, several scholars have described Shakespeare as “rewriting” the anonymous *Leir* (Bullough VII, 270; Duncan-Jones 185), and the subtitle of Sidney Lee's edition refers to it as “The Original of Shakespeare's ‘King Lear’” (ix). There is some disagreement as to whether he had access to a text of *Leir*, merely saw a performance of it, or perhaps acted in it.² The evidence presented in this paper will recapitulate and reinforce the claim that he used the earlier play extensively, and demonstrate that he wrote it himself during his teen years. That the author was Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, has already been demonstrated on numerous occasions (Anderson; Sobran; Whalen).

King Leire

Although the legend of the British king who elected to resign his throne and divide his kingdom among his three daughters had been known in England for hundreds of years, the first dramatic version was *The moste famous Chronicle Historye of LEIRE kinge of England and his Three Daughters*, entered in the Stationers Register on May 14, 1594 by Edward White, a publisher and bookseller who had published the first Quarto of *Titus Andronicus* earlier in the year (Arber, II 649). This play was most probably the *Kinge Leare* that Philip Henslowe recorded in his diary as performed twice in his Rose Theater in the month just previous, during the tenancy of the Queen's Men and the Earl of Sussex's Men in the spring of 1594 (Henslowe 21). There is no extant copy of a quarto proceeding from this entry, and it is likely that none was printed.³ E. K. Chambers (*WS I*, 304), W. W. Greg (378) and Geoffrey Bullough (VII, 276) assert that it was not a new play at that time.

A second entry was made in the Stationers Register eleven years later, on May 8, 1605, by Simon Stafford. This was called *The Tragecall historie: of kinge LEIR and his Three Daughter* and was published by John Wright later in the year under the title *The True Chronicle History of King LEIR and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*.⁴

It appears that the publishing rights to this anonymous play passed from Edward White to John Wright, who was his apprentice between June 1594 and June 1602 (Greg 378-9).⁵ Neither of the Stationers Register entries nor the title page of the 1605 Quarto listed an author. According to the title page, the play had been "diverse and sundry times lately acted," but gave no other details. Only five copies survived to modern times. The play was not reprinted until 1766, nor again until 1875. The title page information suggests that the play was revived almost ten years after the reported performances in the Rose Theatre in 1594.

The *Pied Bull* Quarto

On Nov. 16, 1607 another Lear play was registered by Nathaniel Butter and John Busby as

Master William Shakespeare his historye of Kinge Lear, as yt was played before the Kinges maiestie at Whitehall uppon Sainct Stephens night at Christmas Last, by his maiesties servantes playing usually at the Globe on the Bank-syde vj^d.

and was printed in 1608 for Nathaniel Butter with the title

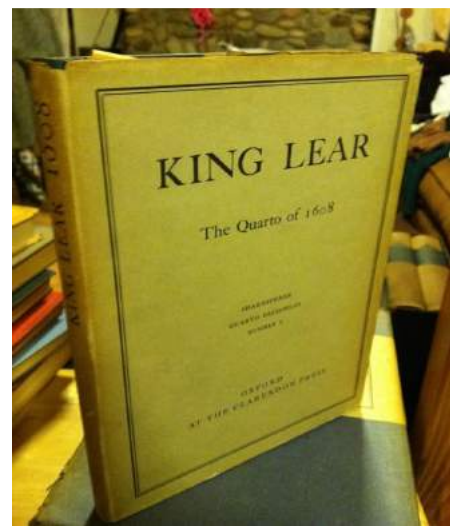
M. William Shake-speare: His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earl of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam

The subtitle contained the same statement about the venue, the audience, and “Saint Stephens night” (Dec. 26, 1606) as the registration entry. This edition has come to be known as the “Pied Bull” Quarto, because it was published “at the sign of the Pied Bull.” Twelve copies have survived, each slightly different, since corrections were introduced during the printing. A second Quarto, nearly identical to the 1608 Quarto, was printed and issued by William Jaggard in 1619, but with a title page dated 1608. The play appeared next in a revised version in the “Tragedies” section of the First Folio in 1623 under the simple title, *The Tragedie of King Lear*.

During the nineteenth century and earlier, it was routinely claimed that Stafford’s 1605 edition of *King Leir* was an attempt to take advantage of presumed performances of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in the same year. Stafford’s edition was registered as a “*Tragecall historie*,” but the play ends happily, although it contains tragic events and circumstances. It was, however, then published as the “*True Chronicle History*,” with the names of the three daughters added. Shakespeare’s play was registered in 1607 as a “*hystorye*” and then published in 1608 as a “*True Chronicle Historie*,” although it is certainly a tragedy. It is unclear from the adjectives attached to the plays by the publishers, that there was an intent by Stafford to capitalize on Shakespeare’s play.

The Annesley Case

A more likely stimulus for the publication of *King Leir* in 1605 was the publicity surrounding the case of Brian Annesley, a wealthy landowner and forty-year member of Queen Elizabeth’s Gentlemen Pensioners, who got into a dispute with one of his three daughters. Annesley had made a will in 1600 that greatly favored his youngest daughter, Cordell. At about the same time, Cordell became one of the Queen’s Maids of Honor (Emerson). Three years later Annesley became senile, and his oldest daughter Grace and her husband tried to have him declared unfit to manage his affairs, with the intent of controlling his assets. But Cordell vigorously protested to Secretary of State Robert Cecil that this was unjust treatment of a long-time servant of the Queen, with the result that in October 1603 Cecil sent his own representatives to take charge of Annesley’s affairs. When Annesley died in July, 1604, Grace and her husband disputed the will and



***King Lear*: The 1608 edition or “Pied Bull Quarto”**

Cordell's appointment as executrix. In December the Prerogative Court ruled all matters in Cordell's favor (Bullough, "Annesley"). This case has been mentioned as possibly prompting Shakespeare to dramatize the King Lear story (Duncan-Jones 187). Considering the dates of Cecil's intervention and Annesley's death, however, it now seems extremely unlikely. (See "Dates of the Two Lears" below.)

Another aspect of the case has been noticed by Shakespeare scholars. One of the men Brian Annesley named in 1600 to oversee his will was Sir William Hervey, husband of the Dowager Countess of Southampton, Henry Wriothesley's mother. After her death in 1607, Hervey married Cordell Annesley. In 1922 Charlotte C. Stopes suggested that Hervey was the "Mr. W. H." of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and that his wishes for the dedicatee's "all happiness and that eternity promised by our ever-living poet" were felicitations upon Hervey's marriage to Cordell in the previous year (343-4). This suggestion has garnered little support.⁶

The Anonymous *Leir*

The *King Leir* performed in 1594 and printed in 1605 was the first dramatization of the story and the lengthiest version to that time. The playwright adhered generally to the traditional legend, except that the defeat and death of Leir's youngest daughter Cordella, which is the ultimate outcome in every previous version, were scrapped in favor of a happy ending in which she survives and Leir is restored to his throne. The playwright thus converted a folktale tragedy that ends with the death of the two leading characters into a theatrical romance in which they both survive, and goodness is rewarded and wickedness punished.

Critics generally describe the play as a romantic comedy with strong religious overtones and no historical pretensions. The conventional plot contrasts "parental unkindness and filial ingratitude, sins against natural and divine law," with "loyalty, truth and piety" (Bullough VII, 281). The hazards of heeding flattery at the expense of candid, if plain, speaking is an explicit message. There are sixteen uses of "flatter" and "flattery" throughout the play.

The playwright added detail and complexity and half-a-dozen new characters to a simple legend, expanding Geoffrey's 1800-word tale into a five-act drama with thirty-two scenes. Its strengths are the construction and movement of a tightly-knit plot with detailed exposition and logical development. According to its latest editor, "the playwright has left no loose ends or incomplete lines of action, and only a single scene (5) could be eliminated without violating the play's unity" (Michie 43-4). Aside from the single phrase "ACTUS 1" on the first page, there are no act or scene divisions, and there is no sub-plot.

But with the possible exception of Cordella and Mumford, the play's characters are conventional and shallow, and little more than the abstractions commonly found in Morality plays. Skalliger is the evil counselor who suggests the love test, and then betrays the plan to Gonorill and Ragan. Subsequently, he incites Gonorill, whom he despises, to terminate Leir's allowance. The foil to Skalliger is

Perillus, the traditional “faithful friend,” who warns Leir against the love test, and later supports and encourages him. King Leir himself is a single-dimensional and disappointing protagonist. After his initial denunciation of Cordella, he becomes passive and weak, and given to rambling and pedestrian speeches. By the end of the play, he has aroused little concern in the reader, and has become merely pitiable.

Cordella is the most fully realized character in the play, personifying goodness and grace, candor and simplicity. She appears to be deeply religious, referring in IV.i to her God and her church, where she intends to “pray unto my Savior” (31).⁷ She never waivers in her love for her father, and readily forgives him for his treatment of her. She is also effusive in her declaration of love for the disguised French King (II.iv.115-24). Her sisters Gonorill and Ragan are vices in regal

Mumford, the French King's companion, has been added by the dramatist to the original story. He brings a vein of humor, usually sexual, to the rather pedestrian dialogue, but his bawdy wisecracks about the charms of British women, including Cordella, become tiresome.

clothes, but reveal somewhat different personalities, Gonorill being the bolder and more outspoken. It is also she who engages in a verbal duel with the French ambassador, and who arranges with the Messenger to murder her father and Perillus.

Mumford, the French King's companion, has been added by the dramatist to the original story. He brings a vein of humor, usually sexual, to the rather pedestrian dialogue, but his bawdy wisecracks about the charms of British women, including Cordella, become tiresome. His frequent sexual puns induce his companions to reply in kind and, in one forgettable exchange, Cordella and the French King tease him about the fidelity of his British “wench” (V.i.11-38).

Mumford's name is a variant of the more familiar Mountfort or Mountford. His strange explanation—“I am kin to the Blunts, and, I think, the bluntest of all my kindred; therefore if I be too blunt with you, thank yourself for praying me to be so” (II.i.44-47)—is a possible allusion to the Elizabethan family of the Blounts, one branch of which was the Lords Mountjoy, who were related to the Earl of Oxford. On the other hand, it may be just a lame pun.⁸ *King Leir* is written mostly in end-stopped blank verse, but contains over 500 lines of rhyme in 250 rhyming couplets. The playwright uses several different rhyme schemes throughout the play, including double, internal and identical, as if he were experimenting. In some speeches he combines blank verse and rhyming couplets or alternative rhyming schemes.⁹ There are many examples of forced rhyme, such

as *much/church*, *chance/presence*, *residence/prince*, *surprise/ease*, etc., and many classical and Biblical allusions.

The verse has been praised as sober, plain and sturdy, but more often as wooden, pedestrian and repetitive. There is little variation in the meter, regardless of the speaker's emotion. Another shortcoming is the repeated references to the action by the characters. In several scenes (for instance 8, 11, 13, 20, 24, and 25), speakers report actions that have taken place, make comments on it, and then reveal what they plan to do. A good example is Scene 24, in which Leir recites the action of the entire play until then to a young woman whom he does not know is Cordella. He then admits that he is seeking the daughter he mistreated, and hopes that she will forgive him, etc. A dozen monologues and more than thirty speeches to the audience also suggest a novice dramatist.

On the other hand, the author of *King Lear* has been praised for the fluency and energy of his verse, and for his "experimentation with words" (E. Everitt 1965, 14). He was prolific in his neologisms and new verbal meanings in Shakespeare's way. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists at least twenty new words or new usages in the 1605 Quarto. More than thirty additional words that appear in *King Lear* are listed in the *OED* as new words or usages introduced by other authors, but in works published after 1575, the latest date of composition of *King Lear*. The particular usages of fourteen additional words in *King Lear*, such as *afterwishes*, *safe-seated*, *tongue-whip*, *true-adopted*, and *undone* are not listed in the *OED*.

The author has included two scenes of farcical humor in prose, in which two watchmen exchange malapropisms and vulgar humor, and then bungle their mission. For Shakespeare's later use of similar characters in similar episodes, see below.

Printing History of Shakespeare's *Lear*

The printing history of Shakespeare's *Lear* presents one of the more interesting textual issues in the entire canon. The Folio text differs from the first Quarto (1608) in several substantial ways. It contains one hundred lines that are not in the Quarto, and the latter contains three hundred lines, including one entire scene and two significant passages, that are not in the Folio. There are also some 850 changes of words, phrases and speech headings. A second Quarto, also dated 1608, but actually printed in 1619, is a corrected reprint of the first Quarto, with some additional minor variations.

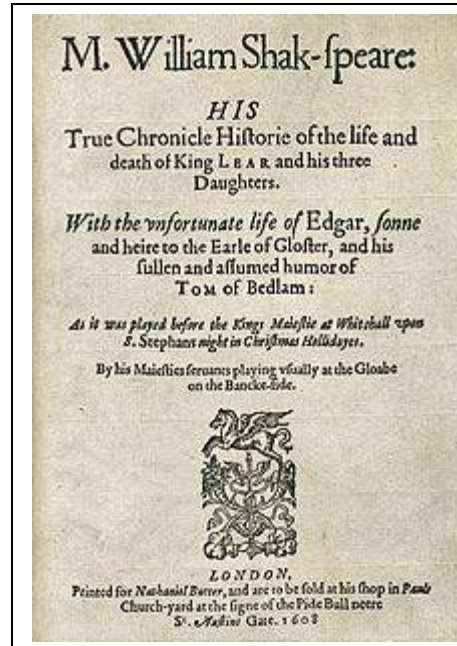
A theory proposed by Madeleine Doran in 1931 has been accepted by most scholars: that the 1608 Quarto was printed from the author's own manuscript, and the Folio text represents his own revision of that manuscript (100). Just when he did this has not been agreed upon. Most scholars think that he revised the Quarto some time after it was performed and printed, but some (Doran 104; Weis 69) argue that he did so even before the first version was performed in 1606 and printed two years later.

Traditionally, editors have conflated the Quarto and Folio texts and published a single text in which they chose what they considered the best readings from each edition. But after an influential paper by Michael Warren in 1978, several scholars adopted a “two-text hypothesis” in which the Quarto and Folio texts were treated as two distinct plays and were published separately. In 1986 Wells and Taylor’s one-volume *Oxford Shakespeare* included for the first time two separate texts of the play, based on the Quarto and Folio editions. But as the most recent *Arden* editor remarked, “...none of the differences between Q and F radically affects the plot of the play, or its general structure, and there is every reason to think that we have two versions of the same play, not two different plays” (Foakes 118-9).¹⁰

Of *King Lear*’s more than 3300 lines, 2234 are in blank verse and 169 in rhyme. The 925 lines of prose are more than in any other Shakespeare tragedy, except *Hamlet* (Chambers, *WS* II, 398). There are more short lines than in any other Shakespeare play (191), and a high number of split lines (243). In the Folio the text was divided for the first time into acts and scenes.

Sources of the Plays

The sources of the two *King Lear* plays are difficult to pinpoint because of the multiple accounts of the legend during the previous four hundred years. Although virtually all of the more than fifty versions were based on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s account, each author told the story differently, with numerous variations in the characters, events and details. The majority of these retellings, in some 170 manuscripts were prose histories, many in French. The first to be printed, in 1480, was William Caxton’s *Chronicle*, an English translation of the *Roman de Brut*, a verse history of Britain composed in French by the Anglo-Norman poet Wace, and based on Geoffrey’s *Historia*. It was popular enough to appear in more than ten additional editions before 1528 (Perrett 62-3). In the 1490s Robert Fabyan completed his *New Chronicles of England and France*, which also included the King Lear story. It was printed in 1516 and is considered “important as a basis for Holinshed” (Perrett 76). Another popular chronicle of English history, by John Hardyng, that included the King Lear story was circulated in manuscript after 1463, and printed, with additions, by Richard Grafton in 1543. Additional ver-



sions of the Lear story also appeared in three works of poetry published after 1550. These include *Albion's England*, a lengthy poem about English history by William Warner, the first four books of which were published in 1586; and *A Mirror for Magistrates*, a collection of linked verse biographies of tragic figures in English history by various authors, the first version of which was published in 1555; the version containing the Lear story was published in 1587. In Canto X of Book II of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queen*, published in 1590, six stanzas are devoted to the "King Leyre" story.

Sources for the Anonymous *Leir*

The anonymous *Leir* is obviously based on the characters and events in Geoffrey's *Historia*, but the playwright adds major and minor characters, a murder plot and many details, although deleting other details and most of the events occurring after Leir's return from France. The added characters include Skalliger, the evil counselor; Perillus, the faithful friend; the Messenger sent to kill Leir and Perillus; and Mumford, the French King's companion. Additions to Geoffrey's story are King Leir's sudden voluntary abdication, the thunder and lightening that frightens the Messenger, the chance meeting and wooing of Cordella by the disguised French King, and the recognition scene between Leir and Cordella. Perhaps the most important modifications are the fate of Leir and Cordella, both of whom are spared, and Leir's voluntary abdication in favor of the King of France, thus inserting a happy ending.

Scholars have identified about a dozen details of language and incident in the anonymous *Leir* that also appeared in the three poetical works mentioned above, and concluded that they were copied from those works by the author. These claims appear to be based on the belief that *Leir* was written about 1590. (For evidence that it was written much earlier, see "Dates of the Two Leirs" below.) Most of these details can be found in Geoffrey's *Historia* or in one or more of the other versions of the story that were available in manuscript or in print by 1550. Others may have been introduced independently by the author of *Leir*. Moreover, it has been shown that Warner, Spenser, and the author of the relevant section of *A Mirror for Magistrates* all used the same older versions as bases for their own accounts (Perrett 34, 85, 89, 90).

Rafael Holinshed's *History of England*, published in 1577, and again in 1587, has also been mentioned as a source of *King Leir*. There is however little or no evidence that the playwright used either edition (Perrett 99).

Sources for the Canonical *Lear*

It is widely agreed that Shakespeare used the anonymous *King Leir* as his main source for *King Lear*. Numerous scholars have identified similarities in structure, situation, thought and expression, as well as dozens of particular verbal parallels



Lear and the Fool in the Storm, by William Dyce (1806-64)

between the two plays (Greg 386-97; Logan and Smith 222-4) These are described below.

Another major source is Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, the new version of which he completed in 1584, but was not published until 1590. The subplot involving Gloucester and his sons, Edmund and Edgar, appears to have been inspired by the story in Book 2, chapter 10 in which Plexirtus, the wicked bastard son of the King of Paphlagonia, dethrones and then blinds his father after persuading him to denounce his elder, legitimate son. Several other details in *King Lear*, such as Goneril's and Regan's lust for Edmund, Goneril's suicide, and the storm in Act III, may also have been based on incidents in *Arcadia* (Halio 6).¹¹

Also accepted as source material for *King Lear*, especially in Act III, is Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, etc.*, published in 1603. Several dozen words, names, phrases and ideas that appear in *King Lear* are identical with those in Harsnett's book (Muir, "Harsnett"; Brownlow 107-132).

The notorious Annesley case is frequently cited as a source, or inspiration, for *King Lear* but, as noted above, this is unlikely. The additions made to *A Mirror for Magistrates* by John Higgins in 1574, Holinshed's *History*, and Canto X of Book II of Spenser's *The Fairie Queen* (1590), have also been cited as sources for several details (Bullough VII, 323-34). Bullough also notes Warner's *Albion's England* as a "possible source" (VII, 335-6), but elsewhere states that "Nothing suggests that Shakespeare was influenced by this piece" (VII, 276). Wilfrid Perrett, in the most exhaustive study of *Lear's* sources, finds only a few details in Holinshed (273); R. A. Law discovers none ("Holinshed's" 49-50). Both mention Holinshed's reliance on Fabyan's *Chronicles*. Perrett observes that Shakespeare used details from Layamon's *Brut*, a revised and enlarged version of Geoffrey's *Historia* (44-5).

Relationship Between the Two *Lears*

Structure and Plot

Shakespeare obviously used the old play as a template on which to construct the new, but added characters, details and incidents, as well as a subplot that mirrors and complements the main story. In addition, he completely rewrote the verse, elaborating or compressing the dialogue so as to create emotional intensity and shift the mood of the play from genial to terrifying. He transformed a simple and pleasing romance, in which there is no violence and not a single death, into a tragedy riddled by humiliation, torture, suicide and murder.

In his revision, Shakespeare begins his play with the love test, which in *King Leir* doesn't occur until the third scene. In the source play, Leir has an altruistic reason for prescribing the love test for his daughters. Expecting each of them to profess that she loves him above all others, his plan is to then reply to Cordella that she can please him by marrying a "king of Brittany."¹² His intent is to see that she is provided with a well-fixed husband, her two sisters being already engaged to kings. There is no such intent in Shakespeare's revision, and thus less dramatic credibility behind the love test. A remnant of the old play remains in Lear's offer of the dowerless Cordelia to Burgundy or France. Burgundy refuses but France enthusiastically accepts.

The outcome of the love test and the king's abdication are essentially the same in both plays, as are his youngest daughter's departure and her marriage to the French king. Lear too leaves the scene of his humiliation and rejection, in *Leir* to France with Perillus, in *Lear* to a desolate heath with the Fool and later Kent. Near the end of both plays, Cordella/Cordelia arrives at Dover with the French king and his army. In *Leir* she is accompanied by her father after their having met in France and reconciled in an emotional scene. In *Lear* they have the same tearful reconciliation when he is brought by servants to the French camp in a chair. In both plays the king is ailing and confused and prepared to die. When he and his daughter are reunited he begs her forgiveness for his actions.

In the anonymous play, the French army defeats Cornwall and Cambria, Cordella and Leir are triumphant and he is restored to his throne. But Shakespeare has the British army defeat the French and capture Lear and Cordelia. In the final scene, Goneril and Regan quarrel over Edmund, and in short order all three are dead. Cordelia is hanged by mistake, and Lear, holding her in his arms, dies as well.



Lear and Cordelia, by Ford Madox Brown

The most significant addition made by the dramatist to his first version is a subplot in which another father, the Duke of Gloucester, and his two sons, one legitimate, one not, are drawn into the dispute between Lear and his daughters. Although Shakespeare dropped the evil counselor Skalliger, the addition of these three characters and Goneril's servant Oswald greatly thickens the plot. Oswald and Gloucester's son Edmund supply more than enough wickedness to make up for the loss of Skalliger. Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan are no less calculating and vicious than in *King Leir*, but the author added a dimension to their immorality by assigning to each an adulterous lust for Edmund. Further additions that Shakespeare made to the *Leir* story are the transformation of the king's eccentricities into madness and the supremely tragic scenes with the Fool, for which no source has been found.

Shakespeare discarded the aborted murder-for-hire of Leir and Perillus initiated by Gonorill in the anonymous play. In place of this he added a vicious blinding (of Gloucester by Cornwall), four intended murders (of Lear and Cordelia by Edmund; of Gloucester by Oswald; of Albany by Edmund), five successful ones (of Cornwall by a servant; of the servant by Regan; of Oswald by Edgar; of Regan by Goneril; of Edmund by Edgar), an attempted suicide (Gloucester's), a successful one (Goneril's) and, finally, Cordelia's hanging before a late reprieve, and Lear's own death from grief. Shakespeare also dropped the farcical interludes involving the incompetent watchmen, and did not replace them with anything similar. The little laughter there is in *King Lear* is the sardonic humor of the Fool.

Another obvious difference between the two plays is Shakespeare's replacement of the overt but anomalous Christianity of the characters in *King Leir* with a group of characters in a pagan setting where the presence of justice, both poetic and divine, is routinely questioned.

Characters

In the same way that he retained the basic plot of *King Leir*, Shakespeare kept its seven main characters and used the same or similar names, plus two others, whom he renamed, but kept in the same roles and relationships. The king, his three daughters and their husbands reappear in the same roles, but all have been transformed into articulate and fully-realized individuals. On the other hand, the repeated references to the action by the characters in *King Leir* sometimes makes their motivations clearer than in Shakespeare's revision.

Cordella/Cordelia plays the same role and behaves in the same way in both plays, but in the Folio *Lear* her role is less important, and she is given only half as many lines. The Cordella of *King Leir* is less complex but more religious. Also much is made of her beauty, while Shakespeare rather emphasizes her virtue.

The King Leir of the source play is irrational and stubborn, in the same way as the Lear of the Folio. He conducts the love test, banishes Cordella, and then rejoices at his oldest daughters' imminent weddings. But in his next appearance, at Gonorill's castle, he has suddenly become sad and gloomy, and complains of his "troubled days" and the lack of "worldly joys"—"Then welcome sorrow, Leir's only friend." When Gonorill turns on him, calls him a "vild old wretch," and urges him to "seek some other place," he is quick to blame himself—"This punishment my heavy sins deserve." Weeping, he laments that he has lived too long and urges "gentle death" to end his sorrows "with thy fatal dart." He continues to bemoan his fate in the same way until well after his reconciliation with Cordella, only after which both of them denounce Gonorill and Ragan.

In the canonical *Lear*, however, when Goneril demands that Lear reduce his complement of knights, he reacts angrily, and directs a stream of invective against her. Proceeding to Gloucester's castle, he is enraged to find his servant Kent, disguised as Caius, in the stocks. When Regan invites him to return to Goneril, he

denounces her in the same terms. At this point he begins to speak of madness, as distinguished from the simple eccentricity of the Leir in the source play.

Two characters added to the story in the anonymous *King Leir* are carried over into Shakespeare's revision, but under different names. Gonorill's anonymous Messenger, whom she sends to murder Leir and Perillus, is recast in *Lear* as Goneril's steward Oswald, who is dispatched by her with a letter to Regan, and who later contemplates murdering Gloucester. King Leir's faithful and truth-telling companion Perillus is recast as the Earl of Kent, a younger man who attempts to warn Lear of his folly in the same way. Both Perillus and Kent, at the same moment in each play, when the King has just banished Cordella/Cordelia, beg him to reconsider his rash act and restore her to his favor. Each is rebuked by the King in almost identical language:

Leir: Urge this no more, and if thou love thy life:

—*King Leir* II.iii.99

Lear: Kent, on thy life, no more.

— *King Lear* I.i.154

In the same conversations, both Perillus and Kent decry the King's decision and liken it to a type of moral blindness:

Perillus: Ah, who so blind, as they that will not see
The near approach of their own misery?

—*King Leir* II.iii.106-7

Kent: See better, Lear; and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.

—*King Lear* I.i.158-9

Both Perillus and Kent depart from the scene shortly after their protests, Perillus willingly but Kent by banishment. When Perillus returns several scenes later, Leir does not recognize him. When Kent reappears, he is disguised as Caius, a servant, and Lear does not recognize him until the final scene. Sidney Lee pointed out that in the anonymous *Leir* "Hardly any of the speeches which Perillus and Leir address to one another failed to yield suggestion to Shakespeare" (xxxix).

The role of Lear's Fool is another carry-over, to a more imaginative and provocative person, of the function of Perillus:

Leir: Cease, good Perillus, for to call me Lord,
And think me but the shadow of myself.

—*King Leir* IV.ii.16-17

Lear: Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: Lear's shadow.

—*King Lear* I.iv.230-1¹³

Leir's admonition of Perillus is perhaps the first instance of the dramatist's use of the shadow/substance comparison, a motif that persists throughout the canon. His description of himself as a shadow, symbolizing his loss of legitimacy as a king, recurs in *Troublesome Reign* (Pt. I, 512-14),¹⁴ and again in *3 Henry VI*, when Warwick removes the captured King Edward's crown:

Warwick: But Henry now shall wear the English crown,
And be true king indeed, thou but the shadow.

—*3 Henry VI* IV.iii.49-50

Although Shakespeare dropped Skalliger, some traces of his language and behavior can be found in Edmund, one of the three major characters he added.

Vocabulary and Style

Although Shakespeare retained the basic plot and the principal characters of *King Lear*, he rewrote the entire play, bringing to bear his poetic skills and his heightened sense of the folly and wickedness of mankind. The loose, monotonous and jogging rhythm of the old play has been replaced by a highly compressed language, often in split lines and broken-end speeches. Much of the dialogue is delivered with emotional intensity, including many exclamations, interjections and imprecations, etc. The frequency of feminine endings is among the highest in the canon. The use of imagery is greatly increased, and the images used, especially by King Lear himself, often simply express the speaker's feelings, rather than attempt to communicate.

There are more than forty citations from *King Lear* in Eric Partridge's *Shakespeare's Bawdy*, many more than in *King Lear*, but few of them are sexual puns. They are mostly what Partridge calls "non-sexual bawdy" or straightforward sexual imprecations, a great many of them by Lear himself, such as his extended diatribe on copulation in IV.vi.

In *King Lear* there are more than fifty legal terms or ordinary words used in a legal sense. Examples are *abridge*, *assizes*, *confute*, *debar*, *enjoin*, *indictment*, *indubitate*, *letters of contract*, *prosecute*, *sequestered*, *upon condition*, etc. In contrast, the canonical *King Lear* contains only about thirty legal terms and concepts, and none of the above. Instead, the terms are more general in nature, such as *bastard*, *bond*, *dowry*, *land*, *murder*, *treason*, *usury*, *villein*, etc. It is as if the author, in his first version of the play, was intent on using legal terms to which he had just been exposed but, in his revision, perhaps thirty years later, which contains several legalistic passages, no longer felt the need to display his specialized vocabulary.

A feature of Shakespeare's vocabulary that distinguishes him from all other Elizabethan playwrights is his repeated use of words with particular prefixes, especially *un-*. According to Alfred Hart, words beginning with *un* make up nearly 4% of his total vocabulary (*Homilies* 253). In *King Lear* more than thirty words beginning with *un-* are used more than fifty times—figures consistent with Shakespeare's early plays. Another distinctive characteristic of his verse is the frequent use of compound words, a practice shunned by other Elizabethan playwrights (*Homilies* 254). In *King Lear* the playwright uses nearly fifty compound words, a dozen of which, according to the *OED*, are new to the language.

Both plays contain dozens of allusions to the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and a few from the anonymous *Leir* reappear in *King Lear*. In one case, the reference is to the same

Both plays contain dozens of allusions to the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, and a few from the anonymous Leir reappear in King Lear. In one case, the reference is to the same Biblical passage and at the same psychological moment in the plot, suggesting that the same author is at work.

Biblical passage and at the same psychological moment in the plot, suggesting that the same author is at work. The kings in both plays allude to the same verses in the Sermon on the Mount—Matthew 5:33-7—at the end of which Jesus admonishes his disciples not to swear oaths, “But let your communication be, Yea: yea: Nay, nay. For whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” In the anonymous play, *Leir* demands to know from the Messenger, who has come to murder him, if it is true that he has been sent by Gonorill and Ragan. When the Messenger swears that it is true, *Leir* reacts angrily and warns him that swearing an oath will not save him from hell if he murders him (IV.vii.185-192). In *King Lear* Shakespeare echoes the same verses from Matthew at a similar dramatic moment when a mad *Lear* recalls the lies and flattery of Goneril and Regan, and exclaims

Lear: To say “ay” and “no” to every thing that I said! “Ay” and “no” too was no good divinity.

—*King Lear* IV.vi.98-100

That is, their seeming adherence to Jesus's admonition was not sufficient to save them from hell.¹⁵ A third use, in *Richard III*, of the same verses from Matthew is described below.

Additional Examples

Following are three additional examples of the more than a dozen passages in the Folio *Lear* that strongly echo passages in the anonymous *Leir*.

In their first conversation after she has cut his allowance in half, Gonorill angrily taunts Leir and accuses him of fomenting strife between her and her husband Cornwall, who urges the king not to take offence. Leir replies weakly that she must be suffering the effects of her pregnancy:

Leir: Alas, not I: poor soul, she breeds young bones,
And that is it makes her so touchy sure.

—*King Leir* III.iii.27-8

In the Folio *Lear*, after Lear and Goneril have had an angry quarrel, he seeks refuge in Regan's household. There he excoriates Goneril at great length and calls on heaven to take vengeance on her unborn child:

Lear: All the stored vengeance of heaven fall
On her ungrateful top! Strike her young bones
You taking [infecting] airs, with lameness.

—*King Lear* II.iv.162-4

In Act III of the anonymous *King Leir*, after Leir has banished Cordella and given his kingdom to Gonorill and Ragan, his friend Perillus appears alone on stage and decries Leir's actions. He anticipates that the king will be mistreated by his older daughters, but will not complain:

Perillus: But he, the mirror of mild patience,
Puts up all wrongs, and never gives reply:

—*King Leir* III.i.12-13

This characterization of the King is echoed in the Folio. With the Fool on the heath, Lear addresses the raging storm, urging it to do its worst, and at the same time complaining that it acts in concert with his "pernicious daughters." Then, unaccountably, he resigns himself to silence, but just as he does in the source play:

Lear: No, I will be the pattern of all patience;

I will say nothing.

—*King Lear* III.ii.37-8

Words and actions in the last act of the anonymous *Leir* are repeated in two places in the Folio text. In the *dénouement*, with all the characters in the main plot on stage, Perillus rebukes Gonorill after she has threatened Cordella:

Perillus: Nay, peace thou monster, shame unto thy sex:
Thou fiend in likeness of a human creature.

—*King Leir* V.ix.72-3

A moment later, Leir assails Ragan with similar language, brandishing the incriminating letters she has written:

Leir: Out on thee, viper, scum, filthy parricide,
More odious to my sight than is a toad.
Knowest thou these letters?
[*She snatches them & tears them.*]

—*King Lear* V.ix.75-7

In the Folio text, after Albany and Goneril have turned against each other, he denounces her in similar language:

Albany: See thyself, devil!
Proper deformity [shows] not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman.

—*King Lear* IV.ii.59-61

And in the last scene, he again rebukes her, and confronts her about her letters, forbidding her to tear them as Ragan did in *King Lear*:

Albany: Shut your mouth, dame,
Or with this paper shall I [stopple] it. Hold, sir.—
Thou worse than any name, read thine own evil.
No tearing, lady, I perceive you know it.

Goneril: Say if I do, the laws are mine, not thine;
Who can arraign me for't?

Albany: Most monstrous! O!
Know'st thou this paper?

Goneril: Ask me not what I know. *Exit*

—*King Lear* V.iii.155-62

As Kenneth Muir remarks,

“Shame,” “fiend,” and “know'st thou” are common in both passages; “monster,” “sex,” and “these letters” are echoed in “monstrous,” “woman,” and “this paper,” and the stage direction in the old play was remembered in Shakespeare's “no tearing” (*Lear* xxviii-xxix).

These examples, and many others, illustrate Shakespeare's familiarity with the older play, and the extent to which its words, phrases, and images lingered in his mind as he rewrote it scene by scene.

Another similarity between the two plays is their unusual length. Of the principal Elizabethan playwrights, only Jonson and Dekker exceeded Shakespeare's average play length of about 2750 lines. At 2665 lines, *King Leir* is very close to this average, and hundreds of lines longer than the average play by Peele, Greene, Kyd, or Marlowe (Hart, "Length" 149).

Two other small facts support the idea that Shakespeare was revising his own play. In the 1608 Quarto version of the extended dialogue in I.iv between Lear and the Fool, the latter refers to "That lord that counsell'd thee / To give away thy land" (140-1) But no one counseled Lear to do this in either version of the canonical *Lear*. It is likely that while composing *King Lear* the author failed to recall that he had deleted this crucial advice, given only by Skalliger in *King Leir*. Moreover, as Eric Sams points out, the 1608 Quarto "contains the *Leir* spelling Gonorill *passim* (not Goneril, as in the Folio text) and even the name 'Leir', which twice (B4r, D2r) stayed in his mind and slipped from his pen" (*RS II* 274).

Dramatic Devices

It has been noticed by several scholars that certain dramatic devices and situations in the anonymous *Leir* are repeated or varied slightly in the canonical *Lear*. Aside from the love test, which is present in Geoffrey's *Historia*, these include the use of letters and disguises, the hiring or bribing of a murderer, the use of the weather as a factor in the action, and occasions when a character kneels before another. (Recurrences of these devices throughout the canon are detailed below.)

Letters sent and intercepted are prominent in *King Leir*: at least eight are sent to or from the king. Several are intercepted and others substituted, and in the final confrontation Ragan snatches incriminating letters from Leir and tears them up. Similarly, in the canonical *King Lear*, at least eight letters written by half-a-dozen characters drive the action and mark crucial turning points in the plot.¹⁶ Edmund uses two forgeries to deceive his father and then incite Cornwall to blind him. The main characters repeatedly communicate by letters, notes and "challenges," some of which are delivered, but others are intercepted, redirected, recalled, denied, concealed, misdelivered, undelivered or stolen.

Deliberate disguises and failures of recognition are also significant features of both plays. After the departure of the King's loyal companion Perillus/Kent in both plays, Leir/Lear fails to recognize him when he reappears. In the anonymous *Leir*, the King and Perillus exchange clothes with mariners before they meet the disguised Cordella and her new husband, and in neither play do any of them recognize the others.¹⁷ In *King Lear* both Edgar and the Earl of Kent successfully disguise themselves, Edgar as a mad beggar, Kent as a servant. It need hardly be noted that disguises, masks, deception and misrecognitions are staples throughout the canon.

In the anonymous *Leir*, the King's second daughter Ragan hires a messenger to kill him and Perillus, a task from which he is eventually dissuaded in the so-called "begging scene" (IV.vii). In the canonical play, the same daughter bribes

Oswald to murder Gloucester, at which he also fails, and is finally killed by Edgar, who is in disguise. In Act V Edmund bribes the Captain to murder Lear and Cordelia, but he is also killed by Edgar, and with his last breath attempts to reverse the order, without success.

The Messenger whom Ragan has sent to murder Leir and Perillus is so frightened by sudden thunder and lightening and the "pains of hell" as he is about to do the deed that he reveals his mission and spares them. Similarly a "storm and tempest" appears suddenly at the end of Act II in *King Lear*, and lingers into the next Act as the King shouts his defiance and rails over the injustices done him.

In V.iv of *King Lear*, the "recognition" or "kneeling" scene, Leir and his companion Perillus, both weary and faint from hunger, and wearing rough seamen's gowns that conceal their identity, come upon Cordella, her new husband the king of France, and his companion Mumford in the French countryside. They are also not recognizable, being disguised as "country folk." Cordella and her husband take pity on the two strangers and offer them food and drink. Before long, Cordella recognizes her father's voice as he relates all that has happened to him. When he confesses that he has mistreated his youngest daughter and is now looking for her, she reveals herself to him with these words:

Cordella: But look, dear father, look behold and see
Thy loving daughter speaketh unto thee. *She kneels*

Leir: O, stand thou up, it is my part to kneel,
And ask forgiveness for my former faults. *He kneels*

Cordella: O, if you wish, I should enjoy my breath,
Dear father rise, or I receive my death. *He riseth.*

Leir: Then I will rise to satisfy your mind,
But kneel again, til pardon be resigned. *He kneels*

—*King Lear* V.iv.203-10

After several more lines of reconciliation and forgiveness, he rises again, and Cordella kneels again as she asks his forgiveness. Leir forgives and blesses her, and she rises and welcomes him and Perillus "to our court." At this point the King of France kneels also, and vows to restore Leir's kingdom to him. As the King rises, Mumford himself kneels and rises, as if mocking the other kneelers, remarking that if he goes to Britain and returns without his wench

Mumford: Let me be gelded for my recompense.

—*King Lear* V.iv.259

Editors and critics have decried this episode as overdone and ludicrous, and so it is, ending with Mumford's customary off-color wisecrack. But Shakespeare chose to use the idea, in a more restrained way, several times in his revision of the play. The first occasion is when Lear kneels before Regan and begs for "raiment, bed, and food" (II.iv.153-6); the second when Gloucester kneels as he delivers his farewell to the world in the fields near Dover (IV.vi.34-6). Again, in the recognition scene in *King Lear*, Shakespeare seems to remember the same scene in *King Leir* when he has Cordelia say

Cordelia: O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me:

[No, sir,] you must not kneel.

—*King Lear* IV.vii.57-9

Finally, when he and Cordelia are being led away to prison in the last scene, Lear cries

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness.

—*King Lear* V.iii.8-11

It seems clear that in rewriting the Lear story the dramatist employed several of the same dramatic devices—letters, disguises, messages and the kneeling sequence—that he had used in his first version. These same devices appear throughout the canon. Specific examples, especially of the kneeling episode, are described in the next section.

***King Leir* and the Shakespeare Canon**

King Leir is probably the source of more words, phrases, images and ideas used in the canon than any other apprenticeship play. To quote one scholar,

[E]nough evidence has been brought out, I believe, to convict Shakespeare of repeated borrowing from the anonymous play, especially in his earlier years" (Law, 1960, 474).

Another remarks,

Without [*King Leir*] we would not have *King Lear* or *As You Like It*, while *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet* would be quite different plays. (Mueller 195).

Others have identified repetitions and echoes of phrases and thought, as well as dramatic devices, from *King Lear* in more than a dozen canonical Shakespeare plays, and in *Sir Thomas More* and *Venus and Adonis*. The echoes of language and thought are especially striking in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard II*, *Richard III* and *Edward III*.

Much Ado About Nothing

Jacqueline Pearson has pointed to several instances of language and circumstance in *King Lear* that are echoed in *Much Ado About Nothing* (“*Much Ado*” 128-9). In *King Lear*, for instance, the Messenger asserts his willingness to do Ragan’s bidding, no matter the consequences:

Messenger: Were it to meet the devil in his den,
And try a bout with him for a scratchéd face,
I’d undertake it, if you would but bid me.

—*King Lear* IV.v.19-20

In *Much Ado*, Benedick facetiously hopes that Beatrice will stay in a peaceful mood “so that some gentleman or other shall scape a predestinate scratch’d face.” (I.i.134-5.)

The conversations between the Watchmen in *King Lear* supply even more striking parallels, and illustrate how the playwright built upon two comical exchanges in *King Lear* to create Dogberry, the cowardly constable, and his assistant Verges, both masters of malapropism, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In two scenes near the end of *Lear*, two watchmen are instructed to watch “vigilantly” and to “fire the beacon” and “raise the town” if a fleet of ships appears. The two proceed to garble their instructions with repeated malapropisms and then begin drinking. Later they are discovered drunk by two Captains and roundly berated. The first watchman protests that he is preparing “To fire the town, and call up the beacon” (V.ix.13), but the French have already surprised them and captured the inhabitants. In a similar episode in *Much Ado*, Dogberry and Verges deliver bungled and confusing instructions to two watchmen, who subsequently confront Borachio and Conrade and arrest them. Both episodes are peppered with comic misunderstandings and repeated malapropisms. In *Lear* the Captain instructs the watchmen to perform their tasks “vigilantly” (V.vii.3). In *Much Ado* Dogberry urges the watchmen to “be vigilant” (III.iii.92). The second watchman in *King Lear* confuses “advice” and “vice” in the same way that Dogberry substitutes “comprehend” for “apprehend” (III.iii.25), “confidence” for “conference” (III.v.2), and “suspect” for “respect” (IV.ii.74-5), and so forth.

Thomas McNeal has identified another passage in *King Lear* that appears to be the source of a speech by Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* (“Queens” 47). In her monologue that opens V.v of *King Lear*, Ragan frets about the Messenger she

has sent to murder Leir and Perillus. She is afraid that he will be talked out of his mission:

Ragan: A shame on these white-liver'd slaves, say I,
That with fair words so soon are overcome.
O God, that I had been but made a man;
Or that my strength were equal with my will!
These foolish *men are nothing but mere pity,*
And *melt* as butter doth *against the sun.*

—*King Leir* V.v.13-18

In the fourth act of *Much Ado*, the high-spirited Beatrice echoes the same thought about men that Ragan expresses, and in similar language:

Beatrice: O that I were a man! . . .

—*Much Ado About Nothing* IV.i.303

O God that I were a man! . . .

—*Much Ado About Nothing* IV.i.305

O that I were a man for his sake! or that I had any friend that would be a man for my sake! But *manhood is melted* in cour'sies, valor into compliment, and *men* are only turned into tongue, and rim ones too.

—*Much Ado About Nothing* IV.i.317-21

McNeal's emphasis. And as he also notes, the same passage in *Leir* is echoed in Queen Margaret's remarks about her husband in 2 *Henry VI*:

Margaret: Free lords, cold snow *melts with the sun's hot beams:*
Henry my lord is cold in great affairs,
Too full of *foolish pity;*

—2 *Henry VI* III.i.223-25

Lastly, the sentiments of both Ragan and Beatrice are echoed in these famous lines from *Macbeth*:

Lady Macbeth:
Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,

—*Macbeth* I.v.40-4

Richard II

In her examination of the “mental climate in which Shakespeare’s plays were written,” Meredith Skura cites both the “begging scene” in *King Lear* (IV.vii) and the “recognition scene” (V.iv), described in the previous Section, as contributing to events in several canonical plays. In the “begging scene,” King Lear and Perillus plead at length for mercy from the Messenger sent by Goneril to murder them. In *Richard II*, the entirety of V.iii, near the end of the play, consists of an extended episode in which “Aumerle,” now the Earl of Rutland, and his mother, the Duchess of York, kneel before King Henry and beg his pardon for Aumerle’s involvement in a conspiracy to kill him. At the same time, Aumerle’s father, the Duke, kneels before the King, urging that his son be put to death for his treason. Skura also points out the influence of the begging scene on similar scenes in *King John*, *Cymbeline* and *Coriolanus* (285-6, n. 96).

There are further examples of words, phrases and images in *King Lear* that are repeated or paraphrased in *Richard II* (Pearson 1982). Both *King Lear* and *Richard* use the same phrase in connection with their abdications:

Lear: If they, for whom I have undone myself,
—*King Lear* III.iii.85

Richard: Now mark me how I will undo myself:
—*Richard II* IV.i.203

The King of France in *King Lear* and Northumberland in *Richard II* both express pleasure with those in their presence, using identical phrases:

King: Thy pleasant company will make the way seem short
—*King Lear* II.i.48

Northumberland: By this the weary lords
 Shall make their way seem short, as mine hath done
 By sight of what I have, your noble company.
—*Richard II* II.iii.16-18

The French king counsels his new wife Cordella to put her painful banishment behind her:

King: Forget thy father and thy kindred now,
 Since they forsake thee like inhuman beasts,
 Think they are dead, since all their kindness dies,
 And bury them, where black oblivion lies.
—*King Lear* IV.iv.19-22

In their last meeting before he enters the Tower, Queen Isabel urges Richard not to “take correction lightly” and to react like the lion he is—“the king of beasts.” In his reply, Richard also refers to beasts and counsels his wife with the same phrase used in *King Lear*:

Richard: A king of beasts indeed—if aught but beasts,
I had been still a happy king of men.
Good sometimes queen, prepare thee hence for France.
Think I am dead, and that even here thou takest,
As from my death-bed, thy last living leave.

—*Richard II* V.i.35-9

As *King Lear* prepares to divide his kingdom between his two older daughters and their new husbands, he compares himself to the pelican, which was thought to feed its young with its own blood:

Lear: I am as kind as is the pelican,
That kills itself, to save her young ones' lives:

—*King Lear* II.iii.43-4

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare uses the same metaphor to illustrate an instance of filial ingratitude when John of Gaunt accuses Richard of feeding on the blood of his own family:

Gaunt: That blood already, like the pelican,
Hast thou tapp'd out and drunkenly carous'd.

—*Richard II* II.i.126-7

In *Hamlet*, Laertes describes how he will distinguish between his dead father's enemies and his friends, as he seeks revenge for his murder by Hamlet:

Laertes: To his good friends thus wide I'll ope my arms,
And like the kind life-rend'ring pelican,
Repast them with my blood.

—*Hamlet* IV.v.146-8

In the only other use of the pelican metaphor in the canon, Shakespeare, in *King Lear*, reverses it, so that Lear's reference is to the notion that pelican young were thought to attack their parents (Robin 68):

Lear: Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters

—*King Lear* III.iv.72-75

In II.iv of *King Lear*, Cordella declares her love for the Palmer, not knowing that he is the French king in disguise:

Cordella: I'll hold thy palmer's staff within my hand,
And think it is the sceptre of a queen,

—*King Lear* II.iv.115-16

Richard II uses the same image in his list of the details of his offer of resignation:

Richard: I'll give my jewels for a set of beads, . . .
My sceptre for a palmer's walking-staff,

—*Richard II* III.iii.147, 151

The distinction between what is in the speaker's heart and what is expressed by the mouth is an idea that appears in the Shakespeare canon more than thirty times. The line is sometimes glossed as an allusion to Ecclesiasticus 21.26—"The heart of fools is in the mouth; but the mouth of the wise men is in their heart." Perhaps the most notable instance occurs in I.i of *King Lear*, when Cordelia replies to her father

Cordelia: Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth.

—*King Lear* I.i.90-1

Among the half-a-dozen times that this idea is used in *King Lear* is one in which the disconnect between the heart and the tongue is specifically mentioned, as in this remark by Perillus:

Perillus: My tongue doth fail to say what heart doth think

—*King Lear* V.iv.245

The same idea, using both *tongue* and *heart*, appears twice in *Richard II*:

Lord Ross: My heart is great; but it must break with silence,
Ere't be disburden'd with a liberal tongue.

—*Richard II* II.i.228

Groom: What my tongue dares not, that my heart shall say.

—*Richard II* V.v.97

Similarly, Coriolanus, using the same words, asks if he must say to the people what he does not feel:

Coriolanus: Must I
With base tongue give to my noble heart
A lie that it must bear?

—*Coriolanus* III.ii.99-101

In *Edward III* the King addresses Warwick using the same image:

King Edward: O that a man might hold the heart's close book
And choke the lavish tongue when it doth utter
The breath of falsehood not charact'ed there!

—*Edward III* II.i.305-7

Clearly, the playwright was fond of this metaphor and used it at every stage of his career.

Richard III

The powerful scene in *Richard III*, in which two murderers conduct a lengthy conversation with Clarence in his prison cell and then murder him (I.iv), has no source in any chronicle account. According to one critic, "Shakespeare seems to have been indebted to his own imagination only for the scene of Clarence in prison, his beautiful narrative of his dream, and the less happy dialogue of the murderers" (Skottowe I, 194). But its remarkable similarity to the scene in *King Lear* in which the Messenger confronts Leir and Perillus (IV.vii) has been detailed by Robert A. Law ("Richard").¹⁸ The killings have been solicited previously in both plays, by Ragan in *King Lear*, by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, in *Richard III*. Among the following dozen features in *both* episodes, there are some forty-two separate points of resemblance:¹⁹

1. Men are hired to kill a man of noble birth by someone he does not suspect.
2. A document of some kind, a letter in *King Lear*, a warrant in *Richard III*, figures in the planning.
3. A reward is offered to the murderers.
4. The murderers are cautioned not to be talked out of their task by the victims.
5. The victims fall asleep and wake up frightened after dreaming that they have been murdered by those who have hired the murderers.
6. The murderers enter while the victims are asleep, and decide to speak with them before killing them.

7. The victims ask the murderers how they have offended them.
8. The victims ask the murderers who has sent them; when they are told, they are astonished. They believed that it was a sibling of the person named.
9. The victims ask for mercy, and predict divine punishment for the murderers.
10. After further pleas by the victims, the murderers reply that they are getting what they deserve.
11. The victims warn the murderers that they themselves may become victims of those who hired them.
12. The murderer in *King Lear* is frightened by thunder and lightening, and spares the victims. In *Richard III*, one murderer is frightened by the idea of judgment and damnation, and has second thoughts. But the other reassures him, and they complete the murder.

Although the outcome is different in each scene, the interactions among the characters have an eerie similarity, and many of the words and phrases are identical, or nearly so—the instructions to the murderers, for instance:

Ragan: And then proceed to execution:
But see thou faint not; for they will speak fair.

—*King Lear* IV.v.51-2

K. Richard: But sirs, be sudden in the execution,
Withal obdurate, do not hear him plead;
For Clarence is well-spoken, and perhaps
May move your hearts to pity if you mark him.

—*Richard III* I.iii.345-8

Just before they fall asleep, all three of the intended victims express their weariness and need for sleep. The idea of one keeping another company enters the conversation:

Lear: 'Tis news indeed, I am so extreme heavy,
That I can scarcely keep my eyelids open.

...

Perillus: I'll sit and pray with you for company;
Yet was I ne're so heavy in my life.

—*King Lear* IV.vii.3-4, 18-19

Clarence: Keeper, I prithee sit by me a while.

My soul is heavy, and I fain would sleep.

—*Richard III* I.iv.73-4

A similar thought occurs to the murderers as they stand over their sleeping targets:

Messenger: Now could I stab them bravely, while they sleep,

—*King Lear* IV.vii.31

2nd Murderer: What, shall I stab him as he sleeps?

—*Richard III* I.iv.100

The same fate is predicted in the same words for each of the villains:

Perillus: [*to Ragan*] to send us both to heaven,
Where, as I think, you never mean to come.

—*King Lear* V.x.87-8

Anne: [*to Richard*] He is in heaven where thou shalt never come.

—*Richard III* I.ii.106

The passage in which King Lear alludes to verses in Matthew as he admonishes the Messenger, described above, was echoed in *Richard III* long before the playwright re-used it in *King Lear*. When Lear demands to know if his daughters, Gonorill and Ragan, have hired the Messenger to kill him, the Messenger replies:

Messenger: That to be true, in sight of heaven I swear.

Lear: Swear not by heaven, for fear of punishment:
The heavens are guiltless of such heinous acts.

Messenger: I swear by earth, the mother of us all.

Lear: Swear not by earth: for she abhors to bear
Such bastards as are murderers of her sons.

Messenger: Why then, by hell, and all the devils I swear.

Lear: Swear not by hell; for that stands gaping wide,
To swallow thee, and if thou do this deed.

—*King Lear* IV.vii.184-92

A series of oaths is similarly rejected in *Richard III*, as John Dover Wilson points out,²⁰ in the exchange between Richard and the former Queen Elizabeth, in which he tries to persuade her of the sincerity of his proposal to her daughter Princess Elizabeth:

K. Richard: I swear—
Q. Elizabeth: By nothing, for this is no oath. [. . .]
K. Richard: Then, by my self—
Q. Elizabeth: Thy self is self-misused.
K. Richard: Now, by the world—
Q. Elizabeth: 'Tis full of thou foul wrongs
K. Richard: My father's death—
Q. Elizabeth: Thy life had it dishonoured.
K. Richard: When then, by God—
Q. Elizabeth: God's wrong is most of all.

—*Richard III* IV.iv.368-9, 374-7

Several other such parallels of language and of dramatic actions are scattered throughout each play. In the words of Robert A. Law, there exists “a remarkable analogy between the respective scenes—an analogy which can scarcely be explained as fortuitous, or as due to literary or dramatic conventions” (“Richard” 131). He further asserts that “the weight of the evidence points to Shakespeare as the borrower,” but he cannot, as nearly all other scholars cannot, even entertain the idea that the plays were by the same man.

Eric Sams, however, was confident that Shakespeare was rewriting his own play, not pilfering another's. Citing dozens of identical or nearly identical words and ideas, he concludes, “. . . that manuscript [*Leir*] anticipates *Lear* and *Richard III* in so many and such detailed respects that either Shakespeare plundered it wholesale for his own prestige and profit or else he wrote it” (*RS II* 274).

King John

In *King Leir* Gonorill and Ragan each solicit the Messenger, in a roundabout and guilty way, to kill their father. In both cases, the Messenger responds with pledges of obedience, and readily agrees to the task. Both daughters speak to him about money and “riches.” Gonorill gives him a purse, Ragan two purses (III.v.57-111; IV.v.7-59). In *King John* these interactions are echoed as John solicits Hubert in the same roundabout way to kill his nephew Arthur and hints at a reward:

Hubert: I am much bounden to your Majesty.
King John: Good friend, thou hast no cause to say so yet,
 But thou shalt have; and creep time ne'er so slow,
 Yet it shall come for me to do thee good.

—*King John* III.iii.29-32

Even though he will risk death, Hubert assures the King, “by Heaven, I would do it” (III.iii.58). The subsequent scene of proposed assassination in *Leir* has strong affinities with similar scenes in *Richard III* and *Troublesome Reign*, which are discussed under the headings for those plays.

The Merchant of Venice

In the opening passage of II.i in *King Leir*, the King of France announces his plan to search for the three daughters of King Leir to see if they are as beautiful as they are said to be:

King: Dissuade me not, my Lords, I am resolv'd,
This next *fair wind* to sail for Brittany,
In some disguise, to see if flying fame
Be not too prodigal in the *wondrous* praise
Of these three nymphs, the *daughters* of King Leir.
If present view do answer absent praise,
And *eyes* allow of what our ears have heard,
And Venus stand auspicious to my vows,
And fortune favour what I take in hand;
I will return seiz'd of as rich a prize
As *Jason*, when he won the *golden fleece*.

—*King Leir* II.i.1-11

In the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassanio expresses a similar thought, using many of the same words, about the beauty of Portia. Both speakers allude to the same legend of Jason and the Golden Fleece from Book VII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (my emphasis):

Bassanio: In Belmont is a lady richly left:
And she is *fair*, and *fairer* than that word,
Of *wondrous* virtues. Sometimes from her *eyes*
I did receive *fair* speechless messages.
Her name is Portia, nothing undervalu'd
To Cato's *daughter*, Brutus' Portia.
Nor is the wide world ignorant of her worth,
For the four *winds* blow in from every coast
Renown'd suitors: her sunny locks
Hang on her temples like a *golden fleece*,
Which makes her seat at Belmont Colchis' strond,
And many *Jasons* come in quest of her.

—*The Merchant of Venice* I.i.169-72

Among several other similarities in the two plays are further references to the same legend. In *King Leir* Cordella finds her father thirsty and weak from hunger and urges him to drink:

Cordella: And may that draught be unto him, as was
That which old Aeson drank, which did renew
His withered age, and made him young again.

—*King Leir* V.iv.95-7

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica alludes to the same incident in the same story:

Jessica: In such a night
Medea gathered the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Aeson.

—*The Merchant of Venice* V.i.13-15

Edward III

In his *The Real Shakespeare II* (268-301), Eric Sams makes a strong case for Shakespeare's authorship of *King Leir*, one aspect of which is the similarity of its language and imagery to that of *Edward III*, a play that Sams himself demonstrated belongs in the Shakespeare canon. He cites more than a dozen words and phrases in *King Leir* that are echoed in *Edward III*, a play published in 1596, but probably written in the first half of the 1570s, about five years after *Leir*. In one example, Ragan uses a proverbial phrase to indicate that she will make a show of friendliness:

Ragan: Yet will I make fair weather, to procure
Convenient means, and then I'll strike it sure.

—*King Leir* IV.ii.58-9

In the first act of *Edward III*, the King of Scotland, using the same phrase, assures the Duke of Lorraine that he will not halt his attack on the English without the agreement of King John of France:

King David: Touching your embassy, return and say
That we with England will not enter parley,
Nor never make fair weather, or take truce;
. . .till your king cry out
"Enough! spare England now for pity".

—*Edward III* I.ii.21-34

A third use of this phrase by Shakespeare occurs in an aside by Richard, Duke York in Act V of *2 Henry VI*:

York: But I must make fair weather yet awhile,
Till Henry be more weak and I more strong.

—*2 Henry VI* V.i.30-1

In IV.iii of *King Leir*, the Messenger brings a letter to Ragan from her sister Gonorill. He describes her face as she reads it:

Messenger: See how her color comes and goes again,
Now red as scarlet, now as pale as ash:

—*King Leir* IV. iiii.14-15

In II.i of *Edward III*, Lodowick, King Edward's confidant, remarks how the King blushes at the Countess's reaction to him—using the same words as the Messenger:

Lodowick: Anon, with reverent fear when she grew pale,
His cheeks put on their scarlet ornaments;
But no more like her oriental red,
Than brick to coral or live things to dead.

—*Edward III* II.i.9-12

At the end of Act V of *King Leir*, the French King and his army have defeated the forces of Cornwall and Cambria, and both armies exit the field. In the next scene the King of Cornwall, Gonorill's husband, enters alone:

Cornwall: The day is lost, our friends do all revolt,
And join against us with the adverse part:

—*King Leir* V.xi.1-2

In Act IV of *Edward III*, the two French princes report that their troops have scattered, and urge their father, King John, to flee the field. But he exhorts them to renew the fight with the remaining men. He and Prince Charles use the same language as Cornwall:

King John: Make up [fill up the gap] once more with me; the twentieth part
Of those that live, are men inow [enough] to quail [defeat]
The feeble handful on the adverse part.

Charles: Then charge again: if heaven be not opposed,
We cannot lose the day.

—*Edward III* IV.vii.31-4

Julius Caesar

Near the end of V.iii of *King Leir*, Perillus and the King have fled to France to try to find Cordella. They have no money and no food, and have just exchanged a gown and a cloak for the rougher garments of two mariners. Leir is despondent and fearful that Cordella will not forgive him for his treatment of her. Perillus tries to comfort him:

Perillus: Why, say the worst. The worst can be but death,
And death is better than for to despair.
Then hazard death, which may convert to life;

Banish despair, which brings a thousand deaths.

—*King Lear* V.iii.88-8

In Act II of *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia cautions Caesar against leaving the house, for fear he will be killed. Caesar replies:

Cowards die many times before their deaths,
The valiant never taste of death but once.

—*Julius Caesar* II.ii.32-3

Measure for Measure

A similar idea is expressed in an earlier scene in *King Lear*, and is carried over into *Measure for Measure*. In IV.vii of *King Lear*, as the Messenger stands over the sleeping Lear and Perillus, he says

Messenger: For fear of death is worse than death itself.

—*King Lear* IV.vii.34

In Act III of *Measure for Measure*, Isabel says to the condemned Claudio:

Isabel: The sense of death is most in apprehension;

—*Measure for Measure* III.i.77

Titus Andronicus

As noted by Meredith Skura, the kneeling scene in *King Lear* (above, p. 14) “. . . must have contributed to the kneelings that dominate *Titus Andronicus*, as victim after victim is surprised by his captor’s cruel indifference” (285). Similarly, a sympathetic line is delivered by the French King in *King Lear*:

King: To utter grief, doth ease a heart o’ercharged,

—*King Lear* II.iv.57

and is echoed by Marcus in *Titus Andronicus*

Marcus: Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopp’d,
Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is.

—*Titus Andronicus* II.iv.36-7

and again in *Venus and Adonis*:

So of concealed sorrow may be said;
Free vent of words love’s fire doth assuage

—*Venus and Adonis* 333-4

Cymbeline

Robert A. Law has found a “series of corresponding situations” in *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, both romances set in early British history, that suggest a use by

Shakespeare of a scene and language from the former as he composed the latter (“Analogue” 133-5). In IV.vii of *Leir*, the King and Perillus are lured to “Cambria” under the pretext of meeting Cordella. A Messenger arrives and shows Leir a letter from Gonorill ordering him killed. After some discussion, Leir accedes to his own murder, declaring it “the will of God,” but ultimately the Messenger refuses to kill him. Nevertheless, Leir is despondent and decides not to return to court or to stay in Britain. Perillus persuades him to sail to France in order to reunite with Cordella.

The identical scenario takes place in III.iv of *Cymbeline*, when Imogen is lured to “Cambria” in the same way, by her husband’s servant, Pisanio, on the pretext of meeting her husband Posthumus. Pisanio hands her a “paper” in which her husband instructs Pisanio to kill her because of her adultery. Imogen decries her husband’s accusation, and protests her innocence, but orders Pisanio to do the deed, or she will do it herself. Pisanio relents and refuses to kill her, but she is despondent and refuses to return to court. Pisanio persuades her to disguise herself as a man, and then flee to Italy where Posthumus lives in exile. As Law points out, the same scene in *Leir* forms the basis for a similar scene in *Richard III*, noted above, pp. 42-44.

Other Shakespeare Plays

Thomas McNeal (“Margaret” 4-5) found a significant carry-over of language and thought in a speech by Cordella in *King Leir* that is “repeated first by Suffolk in *I Henry VI* and echoed again by York in *2 Henry VI*”:

*Cordella: I'll hold thy Palmer's staff within my hand,
And think it is the scepter of a queen.
Sometime I'll set thy bonnet upon my head,
And think I wear a rich imperial crown.*

—*King Leir* II.iv.14-18

*Suffolk: I'll undertake to make thee Henry's queen,
And put a golden sceptre in thy hand,
And set a precious crown upon thy head.*

—*I Henry VI* V.iii.117-19

*York: That head of thine doth not become a crown,
Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer's staff
And not to grace an awful princely sceptre.*

—*2 Henry VI* V.i.96-8
(McNeal’s emphases.)

He also cites ten other linguistic parallels between *Leir* and *I Henry VI* that he calls sufficient “to refute a charge that we are here dealing with such common

material and general Elizabethan style as to make findings worthless" ("Margaret" 5).

In another article, "Shakespeare's Cruel Queens," McNeal suggests that, in their characteristic strong wills, wickedness, and contempt for their husbands, Leir's daughters, Gonorill and Ragan (they are queens in the anonymous *Leir*), are the originals of Margaret of Anjou in the Henry VI plays, as well as of Lady Macbeth.

Besides the two examples given above (p. 19), he compares Ragan's threat against her father in *King Leir*:

Ragan: Well, it were best for him to take good heed,
Or I will make him hop without a head,

—*King Leir* IV.iii.27-8

with Margaret's threat against Duke Humphrey:

Margaret: Thy sale of offices and towns in France
If they were known, as the suspect is great,
Would make thee quickly hop without thy head.

—*2 Henry VI* I.iii.135-7

As McNeal notes, this expression occurs in several Elizabethan plays, but only in these two plays is it used by "queens of identical nature" (46-7).

There is one additional striking parallel between *King Leir* and one of the *Henry VI* plays. In his description of himself as "kind as is the pelican" (above, p. 15), Leir adds

Leir: And yet as jealous [watchful] as the princely eagle,
That kills her young ones, if they do but dazzle
Upon the radiant splendor of the sun.

—*King Leir* II.iii.45-7

The metaphor alludes to the traditional notion that eagles test their young by forcing them to look steadily at the sun, and kill those who cannot do so without their eyes watering (Robin 162). the playwright uses it again in *3 Henry VI* when Richard Plantagenet addresses his brother Edward:

Richard: Nay, if thou be that princely eagle's bird,
Show thy descent by gazing 'gainst the sun;

—*3 Henry VI* II.i.91-2

King Leir shares two other characteristics common to the plays of Shakespeare. Jane Donawerth made a count of the words Shakespeare used relating to

“ideas about language”—words such as *speak, speech, language, name, voice, tongue, mouth, throat, ear, breath, pen, paper, ink, and parchment*. The frequent use of these words is characteristically Shakespearean, and every play is replete with them. Donawerth found that in the early plays these words are used at the rate of once in every twenty-four lines, and for the entire canon, once in twenty-six (141, 161). The frequency of these words in *King Leir* is higher still—110, once in every twenty-three lines.

Of the principal Elizabethan playwrights, only Jonson and Dekker exceeded Shakespeare’s average play length of about 2750 lines. At 2665 lines, *King Leir* is very close to this average, and hundreds of lines longer than the average play by Peele, Greene, Kyd, or Marlowe (Hart, “Length” 149).

***King Leir* and other Apprenticeship Plays**

The *King Leir* Quarto of 1605 was one of ten plays belonging to the Queen’s Men that were registered for publication between 1591 and 1595. This company, which has been repeatedly linked to Shakespeare, was near the end of its London career (McMillin & MacLean 160-1), and E. K. Chambers suggests that to sustain itself it sold publication rights to some of the plays it owned (*ES* II, 114-115). Among them were three other apprenticeship plays—*Troublesome Reign, Famous Victories* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III*, all of which were rewritten and published under the Shakespeare pseudonym. *King Leir* is similar to these three and the two other apprenticeship plays in its anonymity, its plain and pedestrian style, and its competent and logical construction. Parallels and echoes are especially clear in the following three.

The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England

The apprenticeship play most commonly associated with *King Leir* is the anonymous *Troublesome Reign*, published in 1591, but written perhaps twenty years earlier. Numerous parallels of language, thought, and dramatic devices between *Leir* and *Troublesome Reign* have been detected by scholars attempting to ascertain the plays’ authors. Both contain similar prose interludes of farce. This has led some to theorize that they had a common author. “A perusal of [*Troublesome Reign* and *Leir*] is very persuasive that the same author wrote them” (Furnivall and Munro xiii). In the words of Arthur Acheson,

The old *King Leir* was evidently written by the same author as *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (sic), which it strongly resembles, though the latter play is clearly the earlier composition (165).

Acheson, however, also thought Thomas Lodge to be the author of both plays. Several scholars have pointed to striking similarities between Mumford, companion to the French King in *King Leir*, and the Bastard Falconbridge, King John’s

companion in *Troublesome Reign*, neither of whom is to be found in the historical source of either play. Sidney Lee remarked that “Mumford...is as brave a soldier as the Bastard in King John, and is cast in the same mould” (xxxiii). Both have the same magnetic personality—bluff and outspoken, and the same function—companion to a King and commenter on the action taking place. Moreover, they have in common a personal quarrel with another character—the Bastard Falconbridge with Limoges, a sometime enemy of his father, and Mumford with Ragan’s husband, the King of Cambria.

Another similarity is the scene in each play in which an assailant is sent to harm or murder a specific victim(s), such as described above in *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*. In *King Lear*, the unnamed Messenger sent by Lear’s daughters, Ragan and Gonorill, confronts Lear and Perillus and tells them what he has been hired to do, showing them Gonorill’s letter as evidence. Because of his guilt over the way he has treated Cordella, Lear assents to his own death. But in an extended conversation, Perillus warns the assassin about what his punishment will be:

Perillus: Oh, then art thou for ever tied in chains
Of everlasting torments to endure,
Even in the hottest hole of grisly hell,
Such pains, as never mortal tongue can tell.

—*King Lear* IV.vii.289-92

The Messenger then begins to worry about his own salvation, and decides to spare them, discarding his daggers.

In *Troublesome Reign* King John sends Hubert to blind his nephew Arthur to prevent him from competing with him for the throne. Confronting Arthur, Hubert shows him the letter from the King with the instruction. Arthur echoes Perillus in warning Hubert of what will await him:

Arthur: Hell, *Hubert*, trust me all the plagues of hell
Hangs on performance of this damned deede.
This seale, the warrant of thy body’s blisse,
Ensureth Satan chieftaine of thy soule: . . .
Advise thee *Hubert*, for the case is hard,
To loose [sic] salvation for a King’s reward.

—*Troublesome Reign* Pt. 1, 1379-82, 1389-90

Hubert insists that he is bound to do what King John has commanded and, after many bitter words, Arthur finally gives in:

Arthur: Then doo thy charge, and charged be thy soule
With wrongful persecution done this day.

—*Troublesome Reign* Pt. 1, 1415-16

At this point, Hubert accedes to his conscience and, just as the assassin in *King Lear*, abandons his mission and spares Arthur any injury.

In *King Lear* Ragan expresses her anger at Cordella, thinking that she was the “cause of this uncertain ill,” and threatens to follow her to France:

Ragan: And with these nails scratch out her hateful eyes:

—*King Lear* V.ii.27

Constance uses almost exactly the same words to express her anger at Queen Elinor in *Troublesome Reign*. Exclaiming that the Queen is “the wretch that broacheth all this ill,” Constance asks herself

Constance: Why fly I not upon the beldam’s face
And with my nails pull forth her hateful eyes

—*Troublesome Reign* Pt. 1, 812-13

This particular literal image, of a woman attacking another’s face with her nails, recurs in a dozen canonical plays—twice in *King Lear*—first when an angry Lear castigates Goneril for demanding that he reduce his complement of knights in her castle:

Lear: I have another daughter,
Who I am sure is kind and comfortable.
When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
She’ll flay thy wolvis visage.

—*King Lear* I.iv.305-8

and again in Act III, as Gloucester tries to explain to Regan and Cornwall why he has sent Lear to Dover:

Gloucester: Because I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes,

—*King Lear* III.vii.56-7

Further evidence of a single mind at work can be found in short scenes in *King Lear*, *Edmund Ironside*, and in *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, in which a king falls instantly in love with a girl he has just met. In all three instances, this whirlwind wooing results in a prompt marriage.

In II.iv of *King Lear* Cordella encounters the French King and Mumford, who are disguised as pilgrims. Both the King and Mumford are immediately attracted to her and, fewer than thirty lines later, the King declares

King: I am in such a labyrinth of love,

As that I know not which way to get out.

—*King Lear* II.iv.46-7

He promptly proposes and she accepts. When they reappear several scenes later, they are married.

This scene is re-enacted in *Edmund Ironside*, when King Canute meets Egina, the underage daughter of the Earl of Southampton, offers her a cup of wine, and proposes—all in the space of thirty lines. As in *King Lear*, Egina promptly accepts his proposal.

Egina: What my dread sovereign and my father wills
I dare not, nay I will not, contradict.

—*Edmund Ironside* II.i.37-8²¹

The playwright's first dramatization of an impetuous proposal of this kind was in his first play, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*. In that play King Henry V, immediately after accepting the surrender of the King of France, decides that he is in love with his daughter Katherine:

Henry V: Ay, but I loue her, and must craue her—
Nay, I loue her, and will have her!

—*Famous Victories* Scene xviii.46-7²²

Katherine, aged nineteen at the time, responds to his proposal in the same spirit as Egina accepts Canute's, and in similar words:

Katherine: If I were of my own direction, I could give you answer; but seeing I
stand in my father's direction, I must first know his will.

—*Famous Victories* Scene xviii.76-8

The scene is again recapitulated in the last act of *Henry V*, when Henry abruptly proposes to the French King's daughter Katherine. After a lengthy exchange, she replies that if it pleases her father, then it will "content" her (V.ii.247-50).

Edmond Ironside

Eric Sams found dozens of parallels of words and phrases between *King Lear* and *Edmond Ironside*, leading him to assert that "...these two textual tapestries were woven by the same hand, from the same threads of discourse, at much the same time" ("King Lear" 270). Three examples:

In Act I of *King Lear*, Perillus decries Lear's treatment of Cordella:

Perillus: Reason to rage should not have given place,
—*King Leir* I.iii.139

just as Edmund admonishes Canute in *Edmund Ironside*:

Edmund: . . . govern thou thy surly terms with reason, not with rage.
—*Edmund Ironside* V.ii.1810-11

In III.ii of *King Leir*, Gonorill complains to Skalliger about Leir's carping at her spending:

Gonorill: And saith, the [banquet's] cost would well suffice for twice.
—*King Leir* III.ii.16

Similarly, in *Edmund Ironside*, Canute remarks on Southampton's largesse:

Canute: Half this [banquet's] expense would well have satisfied
—*Edmund Ironside* II.i.388

The identical thought is carried over into the canonical *King Lear* where Goneril makes the same complaint about her father:

Goneril: His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle.
—*King Lear* I.iii.6-7

In *King Leir*, Cornwall remarks on his messenger's delay:

Cornwall: I'll teach him how to dally with his king
—*King Leir* IV.vi.5

In *Edmund Ironside*, Canute makes a similar comment about the English:

Canute: I'll teach them what it is to play with kings.
—*Edmund Ironside* II.iii.678

The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth

King Lear's mock trial of Goneril and Regan in the 1608 Quarto (III.vi.16-78), part of which was omitted from the Folio text, is a reprise of the mock trial of Prince Hal in Scene iv of *Famous Victories*. In his reformulation of *Famous Victories* into the Prince Hal trilogy, the playwright substituted a mock interview for the mock trial at the same point in the story (*I Henry IV* II.iv.372-481). More than half-a-dozen words—*justice, justicer, sit, stand, take/takes/taken, cushion, tears,*

joined stool—that appear in the 1608 Quarto scene also appear in one or both of the other two scenes.

Dates of the Two *Lears*

It is generally accepted that the *Kinge Leare* of which Philip Henslowe recorded two performances in April 1594 is the anonymous *King Leir* that John Wright published in 1605 (Greg 378; Michie 4-5). Most editors date the composition of the play to 1590 or thereabouts, apparently supposing that the author copied details from the three poetical works mentioned in Section III that were published between 1586 and 1590. But it is more likely that the words, names, and phrases in these works that also appear in *King Leir* were borrowed from a performance, or even a manuscript, of that play, or were just coincidences. The evidence indicates that the play was written some twenty years earlier, during or soon after Oxford's attendance at Gray's Inn in the late 1560s.

There is ample evidence of his poetic output at about that time, and of his entertaining the Queen with dramatic "devises" in the 1570s.²³

As previously noted, *King Leir* has all the characteristics of Shakespeare's five earliest surviving plays, all published anonymously, and all of which I have dated to his apprenticeship period—before his tour of France and Italy in 1575.²⁴ The several elements carried over from Morality plays—the two counselors, one good, one evil; the simple one-sided characters that do not change; the primitive dramaturgy; the happy ending in which goodness is rewarded—also suggest an early date. Moreover, Revels Office records indicate that there was a "vogue at Court of romances" such as *King Leir* during the twenty-five-year period beginning about 1570 (Michie 36; Harbage 62).

Although the composition of the canonical *King Lear* is traditionally dated to 1605/6 on the basis of two alleged sources—Harsnett and the English translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, both published in 1603—it was certainly earlier, and most likely during the last decade of Oxford's life. There is a wealth of evidence that Oxford had access to Harsnett's source—a certain "book of Miracles" by the Jesuit priest William Weston, also known as "Edmunds," that was extant in the late 1580s.²⁵ Also, since Oxford was competent in French from his teen years, he could have read Montaigne when his *Essays* were published in French in 1580, 1588 and 1595. A single mention of "these late eclipses of the sun and moon" (I.ii.103-4) has been alleged to refer to eclipses in 1605, but it could just as well have referred to the eclipses that occurred in 1590, 1598 and 1601 (Furness 379-80).

Contrary Evidence

The anonymous *King Leir* has been ascribed to Marlowe (Robertson 400), Lodge (Acheson 164), Kyd (W. Wells 434-8), Peele (Sykes 128), Greene (Law, "KJKL"), Munday (Crundell 310-11) and "an imitator of Shakespeare" (Alexander 171). In

the opinion of Sidney Lee, the play's verse falls far below the level of Marlowe's, and if it were by Lodge, Kyd, Peele or Greene, "the publisher is not likely to have ...withheld all key to the dramatist's name from the title-page" (xx). Lee introduced the name of William Rankins, the author of a play about one of King Lear's successors to the throne of Britain. But neither this play nor the three other historical plays by Rankins have survived, so the matter cannot be pursued. Lee also speculated that *King Leir's* author subsequently wrote *Lochrine*, another play about an early British king, published in 1595, that appeared with the author's initials "W. S." on the title page.

It is significant that all but a handful of modern critics and editors seem reluctant to assign an author to *King Leir*, choosing to refer to him as the "old playwright" or the "older journeyman dramatist" (Charlton 195). The most recent editor of the play does not address the question at all, although he is confident that "we do know when it first appeared on stage," assuming that the performance in April 1594 was the first (Michie 4).

It appears that the German critic Ludwig Tieck was the first scholar to attribute *King Leir* to Shakespeare, in 1811 (Furness 487), but it was not until the twentieth century that this opinion was again hazarded by an orthodox scholar—by Ephraim Everitt in 1954 (173) and by Eric Sams in 1995 (182-3).

Conclusion

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the two Lear plays were written by the same person—the playwright who used the pseudonym William Shakespeare. His first version of *King Leir* was a pleasant romance intended to instruct and entertain. It reflected his basic Protestant beliefs, his recent exposure to the law, and his substantial plotting ability, but also his undeveloped poetic skills.

Three decades later, Edward de Vere had a different view of life and the Creator, and a different message to convey. He transformed this simple tale, infused with Christian piety, into a powerful and violent tragedy in which pagan Gods are repeatedly invoked, and the very idea of justice is questioned. The depth and meaning he added to the story cannot be calculated. One critic remarks upon "the distance which Shakespeare has traveled into complexity, ambiguity and dubiety in his new creation" (Elton 71).

To argue that *Leir* cannot be by Shakespeare because of its elementary plot, wooden characters and pedestrian verse is to say that there was no apprenticeship, no period during which he learned his craft, before writing *Comedy of Errors* or *Titus Andronicus*, or whatever was the earliest canonical play. It appears that the difficulty that Shakespeare scholars have in recognizing the author is an excess of "bardolatry," a refusal to acknowledge that Shakespeare could write a bad play. This refusal extends to assigning substandard acts, scenes, and even passages in canonical plays to other, less talented, writers under the rubric of collaboration.

Again, to argue that he simply rewrote someone else's play is to charge him with an act of plagiarism that would, at the time, be a serious accusation. As Sams

remarks, “there was no recorded complaint or criticism, or even comment, from any quarter, even at a time when such plain plagiarism would be deprecated, as Shakespeare’s own occasional depredations were by Greene in 1592” (*RS II* 273).²⁶ Denying him the authorship of the anonymous *King Lear* presupposes an imaginary “older journeyman dramatist” of whom no trace can be found in the Elizabethan theatrical world.

Notes

¹ A. S. Cairncross, in *The Problem of Hamlet* (136), and Peter Alexander, in *Shakespeare* (171), are the only prominent scholars who place the composition of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* before that of the anonymous *King Lear*.

² Muir (*Lear* xxix) and Weis (68) suggest that Shakespeare had performed in the play, most likely the part of Perillus.

³ In succeeding entries on the same page of his Diary, Henslowe mentions the production (all in the following June) of three plays whose titles also suggest Shakespeare plays, viz.: *Andronicous*, *Hamlet* and *The Tamyng of A Shrowe*.

⁴ Stafford had previously printed Q2 of *1 Henry IV*, “Newly corrected by W. Shake-speare,” and *Edward III*, anonymously, both in 1599, and would print Q3 of *Pericles*, “By William Shakespeare” in 1611.

⁵ Wright was subsequently the publisher and seller of *Return from Parnassus* in 1606, and one of the booksellers of *Shake-speare’s Sonnets* in 1609.

⁶ A more recent proponent of this theory was A. L. Rowse in *Shakespeare’s Southampton* (199-200).

⁷ Quotations from *King Lear* are based on Sidney Lee’s edition.

⁸ The jest on the surname Blount is repeated in Thomas Thorpe’s dedication of Marlowe’s translation of the first book of Lucan (1600) to his friend Edward Blount: “Blount, I purpose to be blunt with you. Edward Blunt (1564-1632), a stationer and translator, was a friend of Marlowe and of Thomas Thorpe, and had links to John Florio, Richard Field and Ben Jonson. He registered two of Shakespeare’s plays in 1608 and was one of the printers of the First Folio.

⁹ Characteristic of early Shakespeare and particularly noticeable in the anonymous *Richard II, Part One*, attributed to him.

¹⁰ The edition of *King Lear* referenced in this article is *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed., which is a conflated text based on the Folio, edited by G. B. Evans. Material appearing only in the Quarto is included, within brackets. Small variations among the texts are described in the Textual Notes (1345-1354).

¹¹ An expanded list of verbal similarities between *Lear* and *Arcadia* can be found in the Muir and Danby article.

¹² In this instance, Brittany is a variant form of Britain.

¹³ In the Quarto, *Lear* answers his own question, at I.iv.218-19.

¹⁴ Quotations from *Troublesome Reign* are based on Bullough’s text in vol. IV.

¹⁵ Jones (125-31). Jones uses the Geneva Bible version of the verses. Osric’s obsequious responses to Hamlet in V.ii.94-100, and those of Polonius to Hamlet in II.ii.67-73 are further examples of what *Lear* is complaining about.

¹⁶ “At a conservative estimate, 111 letters appear on stage in the course of Shakespeare’s plays. . . (Stewart 4). There are more in *King Lear* than in any other Shakespeare play.

¹⁷ Bullough (VII, 280) suggests that this episode was “influenced” by a similar one in *Damon and Pythias* (1565).

¹⁸ Harold F. Brooks has found even earlier “antecedents” of Clarence’s dream in Seneca’s plays and in Arthur Golding’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

- ¹⁹ These are listed by Law ("Richard" 130-1) and expanded by Sams in *The Real Shakespeare II* (279-80).
- ²⁰ Wilson, ed. *Richard III* (xxxii; 236-7).
- ²¹ Quotations from *Edmond Ironside* are based on the Sams edition. The play is also available online at www.elizabethanauthors.com.
- ²² Quotations from *Famous Victories* are from Pitcher's edition.
- ²³ Ward 163-4; Stillinger 51-2.
- ²⁴ My articles on these plays were published in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* (Summer 2001), and in *The Oxfordian*, vols. 6 (2003), 7 (2004), 12 (2010) and 14 (2012).
- ²⁵ See Bowen; Ward 14-15; A. Everitt; ODNB, William, third Lord Vaux. Part of Bowen's essay was reprinted in v. 2 of Miller's 1975 edition of *Shakespeare Identified*.
- ²⁶ This issue is discussed at greater length in Alexander (230-1) and Vickers (522-7).

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