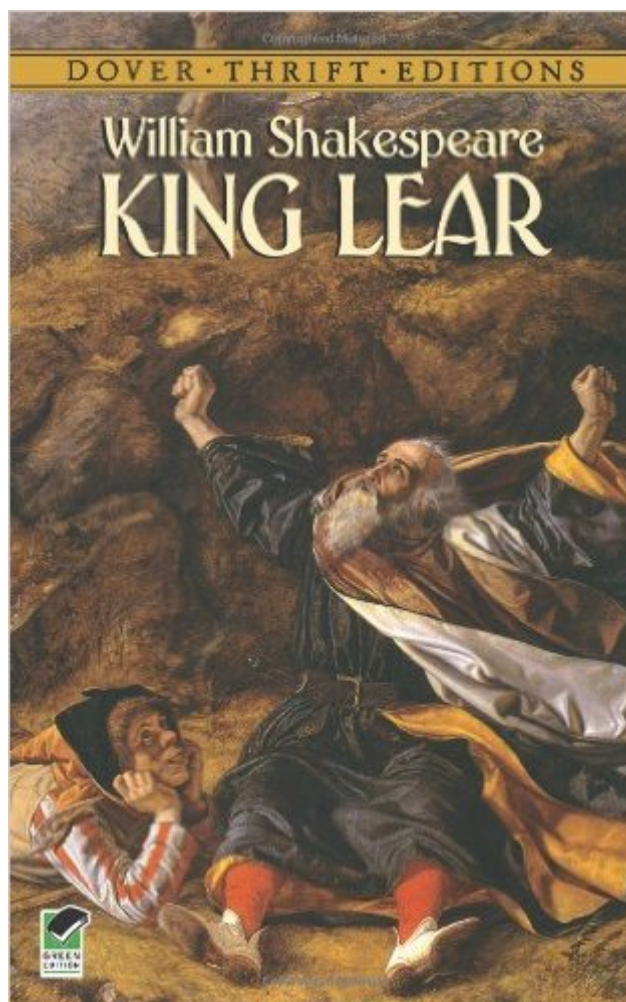


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King Lear (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

First performed about 1805, *King Lear* is one of the most relentlessly bleak of Shakespeare's tragedies. Probably written between *Othello* and *Macbeth*, when the playwright was at the peak of his tragic power, *Lear*'s themes of filial ingratitude, injustice, and the meaninglessness of life in a seemingly indifferent universe are explored with unsurpassed power and depth. The plot concerns a monarch betrayed by his daughters, robbed of his kingdom, descending into madness. Greed, treachery, and cruelty are rife and the denouement of the play is both brutal and heartbreaking. In fact, so troubling is its vision of man's life that, until the mid-19th century, the play was performed most often with a non-Shakespearean happy ending, with *Lear* back on his throne and Cordelia, the daughter nearest his heart, happily married to the noble Edgar. But there is a dark magnificence to Shakespeare's original vision of the *Lear* story, and the play is performed today essentially as he wrote it, uncompromised by later "improvements." *King Lear* is reprinted here from an authoritative British edition, complete with explanatory footnotes.

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Customer Reviews

Although RA Foakes' Arden³ edition appeared some years after those of Wells & Taylor (Complete Oxford) and Jay L Halio (Cambridge) it did not follow their precedent of issuing separate texts based on Quarto and Folio originals. These early texts (Q 1608 and F 1623 respectively) occasionally offer quite different versions of the play and reconciling them to form a single, coherent whole is a task that is, arguably, less elegant than the dual edition solution. By comparison, Arden's text looks

cumbersome, with numerous Q and F superscripts surrounding passages found exclusively in one or other source. Foakes is well aware that his single, 'conflated' text isn't as fashionable as those of the 'revisionists' mentioned above, who believe that the Folio text of Lear represents Shakespeare's revised and final draft, and that modern editors should not pick and mix between Q and F but respect the integrity of the two early sources. While seemingly reactionary, Foakes is in fact countering the new orthodoxy of Halio et al. In his view, their 'dogmatic and purist stance ... abandons the idea of King Lear as a single work of which we have two versions.' He is cautious and level-headed in his approach, aware of the limitations of scholarly speculation and in presenting both Q and F variants he allows the reader to make up her/his own mind. Aside from this central controversy, Arden3 Lear has much to offer.

"Nothing will come of nothing" the fatal line Lear utters to Cordelia sums up the entire play. The wizened king believes he is urging Cordelia not to refrain from expressing her love for him when in fact he is unwittingly prompting her to use the same insincere flattery as her sisters. When Cordelia refuses to acquiesce to Lear's wishes, he banishes her from the kingdom and divides it among her nefarious sisters Goneril and Reagan. In doing this Lear accepts their empty flattery instead of Cordelia's austere profession of paternal love. Goneril and Reagan quickly betray Lear and then turn against each other. Thus Lear's preference for empty flattery (nothing) destroys his authority and embroils his kingdom in civil strife (generates nothing). This theme runs like a thread through other parts of the play. Gloucester's blindness toward the nature of his sons results in his literal blindness later in the play. Metaphorical blindness generates physical blindness (nothing comes of nothing). Similarly, after Edgar is banished he avoids further harm by shedding his identity and disguising himself as a vagrant. In the new order of things eliminating one's status results in no harm (another version of nothing coming from nothing). The motif of nothing coming from nothing has psychological and political ramifications for the play. From a psychological point of view Lear fails to realize that the type of adulating love he wants from Cordelia no longer exists because Cordelia is no longer a child. Her refusal to flatter Lear is, in a sense, an act of adolescent rebellion. Lear's failure to recognize the fact that Cordelia still loves him but not with the totality of a child proves to be his undoing.

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