



King Lear [with Biographical Introduction]

William Shakespeare

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"King Lear" is, in its picture of the tragic effect of human weakness and human cruelty, the most overpowering of the works of Shakespeare. It was written about 1605, in the middle of that period of his activity when he was interested, for whatever reason, in portraying the suffering and disaster that are entailed by defects of character, and the terrible cost at which such defects are purged away; and not even "Hamlet" displays these things so irresistibly. The germ of the story is found in the folk-lore of many ages and countries. Attached to the name of Lear, the legend assumed pseudo-historical form with Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century, was handed down through the long line of Latin and English chroniclers, appeared in collections of tales, found a place in Spenser's "Faerie Queene," and was dramatized by an anonymous playwright about ten years before the date of Shakespeare's drama. To Shakespeare himself is due the tragic catastrophe which takes the place of the traditional fortunate ending, according to which the French forces were victorious, and Lear was restored to his kingdom. He first makes Lear go mad; invents the banishment of Kent and his subsequent disguise; creates the Fool; and, finally, connects with Lear the whole story of Gloucester and his sons.

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