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1 *The Texts and Early Performances*

The First Quarto Edition, 1608

The title page of a small, unbound text of *King Lear*, known today as the first Quarto and here referred to as Q, announced that it had been

played before the King's Majesty at Whitehall upon St. Stephen's night in Christmas Holidays by his Majesty's Servants, playing usually at the Globe on the Bankside . . . London, 1608.

The date, place and royal audience of an early performance offer more information than we have about most of Shakespeare's plays – even the most popular, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, for instance – but *Lear*'s early history on stage and in print remains far from clear. Even Q's title page disguises the performance's true date because on 26 November 1607, the Stationers' Register had recorded the right of John Busby and Nathaniel Butter to publish 'A book called Mr William Shakespeare his history of King Lear, as it was played at Whitehall upon St. Stephen's night at Christmas last.' This tells us that the first recorded performance was on 26 December 1606 and not a year later as the title page implies; a performance at the Globe would have been some weeks or months earlier.

Q's title page, having followed the Register's account of the Whitehall performance, uses extra large type for 'M. Shak-speare' and adds further recommendations. It has now become his '*True Chronicle history*' and tells the '*life and death*' of King Lear and his three daughters together '*with the unfortunate life of Edgar, son and heir to the Earl of Gloucester, and his sullen and assumed humour of Tom of Bedlam*'. The Gloucester family was not widely known at this time but by

advertising the sub-plot on the title page the publishers would have avoided confusion with an earlier anonymous play:

The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella. As it hath been divers and sundry times lately acted, London, 1605.

Shakespeare drew upon this earlier play (see below, pp. 94–7) but the two quartos have no textual connection beyond, perhaps, the billing of *King Lear* as a history, rather than the tragedy it undoubtedly is and as it would later be published.

Q's text is not easy to read because it is too often corrupt or unintelligible: speeches are wrongly assigned, verse printed as prose and prose as verse; punctuation is often missing, unhelpful or wrong. The manuscript from which the compositors worked seems to have been so badly written that at times they were unable to make sense of it; they introduced corrections during printing but not on all sheets so that some uncorrected pages have survived. For many years scholars considered Q to be one of several quartos that had been printed from a pirated copy written down from collective memory and at times corrected by watching performances. A preface to the 1623 Folio edition of *Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* (here referred to as F) speaks of 'stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious imposters', which, according to the collection's title page, would be replaced with 'the true and original copies'. It was generally agreed that these claims accounted for the differences between a number of 'bad' quartos and 'good' folio texts, including those of *King Lear*.

But this quarto's text cannot be all 'bad'. For all its shortcomings, Q is sometimes obviously superior to the F and it contains passages, amounting to some three hundred lines that are evidently by Shakespeare but not found in F. On the other hand, F has more than a hundred lines that are not in Q. Scholarly opinion has adapted to these facts and now the generally agreed view is that Q had drawn upon Shakespeare's unfinished, uncorrected and rough draft of the play (or a transcript of it), the kind of manuscript that bibliographers commonly call the author's 'foul papers'. Instead of an author who never 'blotted' what he wrote, Ernst Honigmann (1965) had shown that in fact he sometimes revised what he had first written and left

both versions on the page so that they were printed side by side. He also argued that it is always a common practice for poets and playwrights to make revisions after publication or performance. Armed with these arguments, Peter Blayney's account of the printing of the Quarto (1982) is a remarkably thorough account of the complex processes and materials that would be used when dealing with such a text in the printing house.

It took time for the accepted view of Q to change because Shakespeare's fellow actors had claimed in the Folio Preface that: 'His mind and hand went together: and what he thought, he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. These uncorrected manuscripts could not be the 'foul' papers lying behind Q but could be the 'true and original copies' which, according to its title page, were available for the Folio edition.

The Folio edition, 1623

The Folio text differs from Q's in many small ways that do not alter the meaning or the action and in other ways that offer an alternative reading making clearer sense or modifying the physical or mental interaction between the persons on stage. No textual evidence tells us whether Shakespeare was involved in making these changes or in F's omissions and additions but it does seem certain that F bears traces of theatre usage in calls for music of various kinds and entries to be made '*severally*'; directions are added such as '*Stocks brought out*', '*Kent here set at liberty*' and '*storm and tempest*' (II.ii.134, 317, 472); entrances and exits are more complete and consistent in F than in Q. The physical printing of Q has left no unmistakable impression on F's text and so, when F follows Q in very minor particulars, it is likely that the same author's manuscript lies somewhere behind both texts. Judging the value of each textual variant needs more patience and sensitivity than any reader could readily supply; and the puzzle becomes more complicated when the habits and common errors of the compositors of both texts have been taken into account.

Since Q could not provide printers with a satisfactory 'copy text' without numerous and considerable changes, editors turned to F as a later text that, in its own way, also had the author's authority.

It was then discovered that F had not been printed directly from a manuscript but from a copy of a second Quarto (Q₂) that had been corrected by someone with access to a theatrical prompt book (Taylor, 'Folio copy', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 1985). Q₂ has no independent textual authority, being no more than a reprint of Q with some new errors and obvious corrections, along with a few minor, and probably accidental, changes. Its title page gives the date of publication as 1608, the same as Q's, although the book was in fact printed by William Jaggard in 1615, as one of a series of quartos by which he was to secure the copyrights enabling him to publish a Folio containing all the available plays by Shakespeare, a task completed after his death by his son Isaac. Q₂ was a more prestigious publication than its predecessor so that its compositors had ample room for the text on twelve sheets of paper, instead of the ten onto which it had been squeezed by Nicholas Okes. From this circumstance arises its significance for present-day editors.

Although a new theatrical manuscript was used for F, its compositors also followed Q₂, a strange arrangement which Gary Taylor (1969, 1970) explained as the consequence of an editor taking corrections and additions from the theatrical manuscript and writing them in the margins of Q₂, choosing it in preference to Q because of its wider margins. Where insufficient space was available to transcribe (as at I.i.26–66 or IV.vi.161–6), he could have marked the printed copy so that the compositor knew that, at this point, he had to work directly from the new manuscript.

In this indirect way, F's corrections and additions to both quartos could derive from a theatrical manuscript that was one of the 'true and original' copies referred to on F's title page and probably later in composition than the unfinished manuscript used for Q. The passages found only in the quartos could have been cut from the manuscript that lies behind F, with or without Shakespeare's authority. The loss of the 'mad' trial of Regan and Goneril (III.vi.16–55) and Edgar's soliloquy at the end of that scene are major losses that might have been necessary to reduce playing time; or they might have been changes that Shakespeare made to restructure the play and, while its action was still under way, reduce the emphasis on judgement and guilt. Some of the longer passages may have been cut because no room was available to write them in the margins of Q₂.

Both Q and F have readings that raise the possibility that Shakespeare had written two significantly different versions of *King Lear* (see, especially, Taylor and Warren, 1983). At first, the Fool's relationship with the king is closer and more affectionate in F than in Q; for example, his warning that 'Winter's not gone yet . . .' is only in F and so, too, is Lear's insistence that the Fool should take shelter, 'In boy, go first' (II.ii.236 and III.iv.26); only in F do the Fool's last words echo and draw close to his master's, so that 'we'll go to supper i'th'morning' is followed by the Fool's 'And I'll go to bed at noon' (III.vi.81–2). On the other hand, only in F does the Fool speak Merlin's 'prophecy' which effectively widens attention to the fate of all mankind at the moment when Lear tries to shield himself from the judgement of 'the great gods' and believes that his 'wits begin to turn' (III.ii.49–60, 67).

Other differences between the two texts mean that Lear's reasons for resigning the crown are clearer in F and his confrontation with Cordelia more intense; Albany is a more powerful force at the end of the play and Cordelia is seen to be in charge of soldiers. The Q version, however, involves the French King, Cordelia's husband, in the final battle and a French invasion is announced much earlier at III. i.31–8. The relationship between the two versions is complex and so often involves subtle changes of sentiment that Shakespeare may well have had a hand in the revisions. A careful and well-informed discussion of these issues is given by R. A. Foakes in the Third Arden edition (1997), pp. 126–46 and Appendix I: he argues that changes in the principal roles:

generally enhance in F the social commentary in the play, . . . diminish the moral commentary in the roles of Edgar, Albany and Kent, and make it less clear who is right and who wrong in the relations between Lear and his daughters. (p. 146)

Recent editions

Editors have long been reluctant to lose the longer passages and 'good' incidental readings that are authorised by only one of *King Lear*'s two original texts. Until 1986 their usual practice was to take readings from both in an attempt to provide a 'definitive' text that Shakespeare might have written in a 'fair' copy to give to the players. They have therefore printed an amalgam of Q and F, choosing

between alternative readings as led by personal judgement and, more recently, by knowledge of the press-work involved, the availability of type and the space left for changes on each page, and by comparison with the printing of other early seventeenth-century texts. Account has been taken of the talents and habits of individual compositors who, for want of better identification, have in both texts been named A and B. Neither of the two in Okes's shop was experienced in setting play-texts and one was noticeably less skilful and careful than the other. In 1963, Charlton Hinman published two volumes about the printing of the Folio and its influence on the text.

To avoid an endless juggling with two sets of evidence, some recent editors have based their texts on Q alone, arguing that it was closer than F to an authorial manuscript. Others, arguing that F, in some incomplete, imperfect way, represents a later revision by Shakespeare himself, have used that text as their principal source. Still others have provided two editions. In 1986, the Oxford and Norton edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* published two versions, as did Rene Weiss's Longman's edition of 1993, one based on Q and the other on F. The Cambridge edition of 1992 printed two texts in separate volumes.

It is now possible to read *King Lear* in two versions at the same time, following one based on either Q or F while keeping the other in view and thereby encountering many alternative readings of large significance and small. But few readers are equipped to adjudicate between their differences in view of the many technical and minute details that must be considered before making an informed choice. As well as bibliographical and typographical questions, the entire dramatic context should be taken into account, together with Shakespeare's other plays, especially those close to *Lear* in time of composition, themes, characters and action. In practice, all but a very few specialist scholars have limited knowledge and little more to guide them than their own sensitivity to Shakespeare's writing. Except where the text prompts a reader to ask questions of major importance, the best course is to leave the choice between variants to an experienced editor who will have had more time to consider the alternatives.

Most readers should choose an edition that gives the fullest possible text, so that nothing that Shakespeare wrote is omitted, even if all was not intended to be read or performed at one time. The third

and newest Arden Edition (Foakes, 1997) offers a synoptic text of this kind that 'in general prefers Folio to Quarto readings, except where there is good reason for thinking F is in error' (p. 127). It has the additional advantage, unique when it was published, of discreetly marking those words, phrases and longer passages which are present only in Q or only in F and are therefore readings which might well be questioned. The collation and annotations of this edition provide further assistance, as does the commentary in this *Handbook* which notes alternative readings when a choice would significantly affect performance. However much time and experience is used to question the text, a reader should consider *King Lear* as if it were a work in progress, worthy of the closest attention but in many respects not a final and authoritative version.

Because the play's basic action is seldom dependent on the choice of any one version of its dialogue, a student should at first read the text consecutively, from start to finish, and then re-read it more carefully in the same way: this will give a progressive experience that is shaped, weighted and intensified by the on-going interest of the narrative and the ever-changing nature of on-stage events. Then, in subsequent readings, the dialogue should be closely examined so that the persons and themes of the play make a fuller but not necessarily a clearer impression. This is the time to choose between textual variants where need arises and investigation proves enlightening. Such a slow and exploratory way of reading is not as difficult as it sounds. When supported by the ability to make-believe, that we all have to some degree, and by occasional theatre visits to see almost any play, a study of these texts becomes an imaginative engagement with *King Lear* in action. For the majority of readers who will never have performed on a stage, this patient and exploratory way of reading of the text can be productive in much the same way as an actor's committed and open-minded rehearsal. The commentary in this *Handbook* is written to assist in bringing the play to this kind of life.

Early performances

The varied and demanding text of this long play and its ten significant and distinctive roles would almost certainly have placed

a strain on the actors in early performances, as it did on composers in the printing houses. Large-scale and closely focused scenes follow each other with scarcely a pause and, by turns, the acting needs to be grandly impressive, fiercely physical, broadly and subtly comic, intellectually and emotionally charged, verbally eloquent and simple, and at a loss for words. In episodes of madness, sudden violence, or uncontrollable storm and tempest, actors have to struggle to be heard and understood, and must venture beyond any prepared performance or risk losing their audience's attention. Fortunately – or, in view of the difficulties, we might say necessarily – when they first performed *King Lear*, the King's Men were at the height of their powers, experienced in staging Shakespeare's plays and sought after by both a popular public and the royal Court.

Before the performance of 26 December 1606, recorded on Q's title page, usual practice would have staged the play at the Globe on the South bank of the Thames. Recent excavations have established the size and shape of this theatre and scholars have learned much about its facilities by scrutiny of all the texts that are known to have been performed on its stage (see, for example, Beckerman, 1962, and Gurr, 1992, 2000). Most readers of this book will be familiar with graphic, model or actual reconstructions of the Globe and so should be able to visualise *King Lear* in performance on its large stage in the open air with an audience standing in a central yard and seated in encircling galleries. But the Globe was not the only theatre in which the King's Men performed; their plays also had to be effective at Court and on tour across England in the halls of great houses, inns, schools and public buildings, and sometimes in the open air. *King Lear*, like other plays in their repertoire, was written so that it could be performed with little more provision than a stage of sufficient size for scenes involving some 15 or 20 persons, and accommodation for an audience close to the actors, in the same light and on one or more sides.

Almost certainly it was the dramatist John Webster who described an 'excellent actor' in an anthology of *New Characters* (1615) and explained that:

by a full and significant action of body, he charms our attention; sit in a full theatre, and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many ears, whiles the actor is the centre.

In theatres of Shakespeare's day, everything that an audience heard drew attention to the actor's physical presence: 'By his *action* he fortifies moral precepts with example; for what we *see* him personate, we think truly done before us' (ibid., italics added). The commentary in this *Handbook* envisages performance of *Lear* in these very basic conditions, with an actor at the centre drawing and holding an audience's attention. It also describes some features of the staging that are called for by the text and a few of the more spectacular ones staged much later in theatres that were technically better equipped and able to reveal further potentials in the text.

No early cast list has survived but an elegy on Richard Burbage, the most renowned actor of his time, records his performance as a 'kind Lear', a phrase implying a natural king or, perhaps, a caring, family-conscious man: see, for example, 'So kind a father', 'the old kind king' and 'Your old, kind father', etc. (I.v.31, III.i.28 and III.iv.20). In 1606, when he first played Lear, Burbage was a sharer in the King's Men, part owner of the Globe and a little under 40 years of age; he could already count Hamlet and Othello among his roles.

Scholars have allocated other roles among actors of the King's Men but nothing is known for sure: perhaps an actor who had played Claudius in *Hamlet* a few years earlier would find that experience useful in playing Cornwall or Gloucester; a Laertes or Cassius might play Edgar, an Iago (according to the text aged 28) might play Edmund. The surest speculation of this kind is that the Fool in *Lear* was written for Robert Armin who would have played Feste, the wise fool in *Twelfth Night*, and Thersistes in *Troilus and Cressida* (so Wiles, 1987, pp. 136–63).

King Lear was not a popular theatrical success at first and is not alluded to in later Jacobean plays as, with some frequency, were *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *Henry the Fourth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Very few plays written in the early seventeenth century seem to borrow from *King Lear*: possibly Beaumont and Fletcher's *Woman's Prize* in Act II. scene iv and certainly two scenes in Webster's *White Devil* (II.i.219 and V.ii.36–40), a challenging tragedy that was not frequently performed until after World War II.

No evidence survives of a second performance in London until 1664, after theatres had re-opened with the Restoration of Charles II. The only known earlier performance was by Sir Richard Cholmeley's Players in Yorkshire in 1609. Along with a play, now lost, about

St Christopher for which they got into trouble because of its Catholic sympathies, this touring company staged both *Pericles* and *King Lear*, using the recently printed quartos (C. J. Sisson, *Modern Language Review*, 47, 1942). The names of 13 actors are known, but little more about any of their performances.

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