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INTRODUCTION.

History of the Play.

THE TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR was acted at Court on the 26th of December, 1606; as appears by an entry in the Stationers' register dated November 26, 1607, and reading as follows: "A book called Mr. William Shakespeare's History of King Lear, as it was played before the King's Majesty at Whitehall, upon St. Stephen's night at Christmas last, by his Majesty's Servants playing usually at the Globe on the Bankside." This is the earliest, and indeed the only contemporary, notice of *King Lear* that has reached us. Most likely the play had become favourably known on the public stage before it was called for at the Court. On the other hand, it contains divers names and allusions evidently borrowed from Harsnet's *Declaration of Popish Impostures*, which appeared in 1603. This is all the positive information we have as to the date of the writing.

There are, however, several passages in the play itself, referring, apparently, to contemporary events, and thus indicating still more nearly the time of the composition. Of these it seems hardly worth the while to note more than one. In Act i., scene 2, Gloster says, "These late eclipses in the Sun and Moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects." A great eclipse of the

Sun took place in October, 1605, and had been looked forward to with dread as portending evil; the more so, because an eclipse of the Moon occurred within the space of a month previous. And John Harvey had, in 1588, published a book wherein, with "the wisdom of nature," he had reasoned against the common belief, that such natural events were ominous of disaster, or had any moral significance whatever. To all which, add that in November, 1605, the dreadful secret of the Gunpowder Plot came to light, so that one at all superstitiously inclined might well say that "nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects," and that "machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves": putting all this together, we have ample ground for inferring the play to have been written when those events were fresh in the public mind. This of course brings down the date of composition at least to near the close of the year 1605.

The tragedy was printed at least twice, some editors say three times, in the year 1608, the form being in each case a small quarto. It also reappeared, along with the other plays, in the folio of 1623, where it stands the ninth in the division of Tragedies. Considerable portions of the play, as given in the quartos, are omitted in the folio; in particular one whole scene, the third in Act iv., which, though perhaps of no great account on the stage, is, in the reading, one of the sweetest and loveliest in all Shakespeare. This naturally infers the folio to have been printed from a playhouse copy in which the play had been cut down, to abridge the time of performance. — I must add that the play has several passages which were most certainly not written by Shakespeare. Two of these have considerable length, one including seventeen lines, the other fourteen; but, as these and some shorter

interpolations are pointed out in the Critical Notes, I need not dwell upon them here. By whom these were written, and why they were inserted, it were probably vain to speculate.

Sources of the Plot.

The story of King Lear and his three daughters is one of those old legends with which Mediæval Romance peopled the "dark backward and abysm of time," where fact and fancy appear all of one colour and texture. Milton, discoursing of ante-historical Britain, compares the gradual emerging of authentic history from the shadows of fable and legend, to the course of one who, "having set out on his way by night, and travelled through a region of smooth and idle dreams, arrives on the confines where daylight and truth meet him with a clear dawn, representing to his view, though at a far distance, true colours and shapes." In Shakespeare's time, the legendary tale which furnished the main plot of this drama was largely interwoven with the popular literature of Europe. It is met with in various forms and under various names. The oldest extant version of it, in connection with British history, is in Geoffrey of Monmouth, a Welsh monk of the twelfth century, who translated it from the ancient British tongue into Latin. From thence it was abridged by the Poet's favourite chronicler, Holinshed. I must restrict myself to a condensed statement of the Holinshed version.

Leir, the son of Baldud, was admitted ruler over the Britons in the year of the world 3105. He was a prince of right-noble demeanour, governing his land and subjects in great wealth. He had three daughters, named Gonorilla, Regan, and Cordilla, whom he greatly loved, but the youngest, Cordilla, far above the two elder. When he was come to great age, he