

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

thought to understand the affections of his daughters, and to prefer her whom he best loved to the succession. Therefore he first asked Gonorilla, the eldest, how well she loved him. She, calling her gods to witness, protested that she loved him more than her own life, which by right and reason should be most dear to her. Being well pleased with this answer, he demanded of the second how well she loved him. She answered, confirming her saying with great oaths, that she loved him more than tongue could express, and far above all other creatures in the world. Then he called Cordilla before him, and asked what account she made of him. She answered as follows: "Knowing the great love and fatherly zeal which you have always borne towards me, I protest that I have loved you ever, and while I live shall love you, as my natural father; and if you would understand more of the love I bear you, assure yourself that so much as you are worth, so much I love you, and no more."

The father, being nothing content with this answer, married his two eldest, the one to the Duke of Cornwall named Hennisus, the other to the Duke of Albania called Maglanus; and willed that his land should be divided betwixt them after his death, and that one-half thereof should be immediately assigned to them; but for Cordilla he reserved nothing. Yet it happened that one of the Princes of Gallia whose name was Aganippus, hearing of the beauty, womanhood, and good dispositions of Cordilla, desired her in marriage; and to whom answer was made that he might have her, but could have no dower, for all was promised to her sisters. Aganippus, notwithstanding this answer, took her for wife, only moved thereto by respect for her person and amiable virtues.

After Leir was fallen into age, the Dukes that had married

his two elder daughters rose against him in arms, and reft from him the government of the land. He was put to his portion, that is, to live after a rate assigned to him, which in process of time was diminished. But his greatest grief was from the unkindness of his daughters, who seemed to think that what their father had was too much, the same being ever so little. Going from the one to the other, he was brought to such misery, that in the end he fled the land, and sailed into Gallia, to seek some comfort of Cordilla, whom before he hated. The lady, hearing he was arrived in poor estate, first sent him privily a sum of money, to apparel himself withal, and to retain a number of servants that might attend upon him. She then appointed him to come to the Court; which he did, and was so honourably and lovingly received, that his heart was greatly comforted: for he was no less honoured than if he had been king of the whole country. Aganippus also caused a mighty army to be put in readiness, and a great navy of ships to be rigged, to pass over into Britain with his father-in-law. When this army and navy were ready, Leir and his daughter, with her husband, took the sea, and, arriving in Britain, fought with their enemies, and discomfitted them in battle, Maglanus and Hennisus being slain. Leir was then restored to his kingdom, which he ruled for the space of two years after this, and then died, forty years after he first began to reign.

The same story, with certain variations, is told briefly by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, book ii., canto 10; also, at much more length, in a versified form written by John Higgins, and published in *The Mirror for Magistrates*; also in an old ballad, printed in Percy's *Reliques*: but this latter was probably subsequent to the tragedy, and partly founded upon it. It appears, also, by an entry at the Stationers',

dated May 14, 1594, that there was an older play on the same subject. Finally, a play, entitled "The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his three Daughters," was entered at the Stationers', May 8, 1605, and published. Possibly this may have been another play than that heard of in 1594, but probably it was the same. Be this as it may, the piece is a wretched thing, and cannot be supposed to have contributed any thing towards Shakespeare's tragedy, unless it may have suggested to him the theme.

Thus much as to what the Poet had before him for the main plot of *King Lear*. The subordinate plot of Gloucester and his sons was doubtless partly founded upon an episodic chapter in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, entitled "The pitiful state and story of the Paphlagonian unkind King and his kind son; first related by the son, then by the blind father." Of this, also, I must give a condensed statement.

The "Princes" who figure in Sidney's work, being overtaken by a furious storm, are forced to seek shelter in a hollow rock, where, themselves unseen, they overhear a dialogue between an aged man and a young, both poorly arrayed, extremely weather-beaten; the old man blind, the young man leading him. At length, the talk became so sad and pitiful, that the princes were moved to go out to them and ask the younger what they were. He answered, "Sirs, I see well you are strangers, that know not our misery, so well known here. Indeed our state is such that, though nothing is so needful to us as pity, yet nothing is more dangerous unto us than to make ourselves so known as may stir pity. This old man, lately rightful Prince of this country of Paphlagonia, was, by the hard-hearted ungratefulness of a son of his, deprived not only of his kingdom, but of his sight, the riches which Nature grants to the poorest creatures. By this and

other unnatural dealings he hath been driven to such grief, that even now he would have had me lead him to the top of this rock, thence to cast himself headlong to death; and so would have made me, who received my life from him, to be the worker of his destruction. But, noble gentlemen, if either of you have a father, and feel what dutiful affection is engrafted in a son's heart, let me entreat you to convey this afflicted Prince to some place of rest and security."

Before they could make answer, the father began to speak. "Ah, my son," said he, "how evil an historian are you, that leave out the chief knot of all the discourse, my wickedness, my wickedness! If thou doest it to spare my ears, assure thyself thou dost mistake me. I take to witness that Sun which you see, that nothing is so welcome to me as the publishing of my shame. Therefore know you, gentlemen, that whatsoever my son hath said is true. But, besides, this also is true, that, having had in lawful marriage this son, I was carried by a bastard son of mine, first to dislike, then to hate, lastly to do my best to destroy this son. If I should tell you what ways he used, to bring me to it, I should tediously trouble you with as much poisonous hypocrisy, desperate fraud, smooth malice, hidden ambition, and smiling envy, as in any living person could be harboured. But no remembrance of naughtiness delights me but mine own; and methinks the accusing his traps might in some manner excuse my fault, which I loathe to do. The conclusion is, that I gave order to some servants of mine to lead this son out into a forest, and there to kill him.

But those thieves spared his life, letting him go to live poorly; which he did, giving himself to be a private soldier in a country near by. But, as he was ready to be greatly advanced for some noble service which he did, he heard

news of me ; who suffered myself to be so governed by that unlawful and unnatural son, that, ere I was aware, I had left myself nothing but the name of a king. He, soon growing weary even of this, threw me out of my seat, and put out my eyes ; and then let me go, neither imprisoning nor killing me, but rather delighting to make me feel my misery. And as he came to the crown by unjust means, so he kept it as unjustly ; disarming all his own countrymen, so that no man durst show so much charity as to lend me a hand to guide my dark steps ; till this son, forgetting my abominable wrongs, and neglecting the way he was in of doing himself good, came hither to do this kind office which you see him performing towards me, to my unspeakable grief. Above all, it grieves me that he should desperately adventure the loss of his life for mine, as if he would carry mud in a chest of crystal : for well I know, he that now reigneth will not let slip any advantage to make him away, whose just title may one day shake the seat of a never-secure tyranny. For this cause I craved of him to lead me to the top of this rock, meaning to free him from so serpentine a companion as I am. But he, finding what I purposed, only therein since he was born showed himself disobedient to me. And now, gentlemen, you have the true story ; which I pray you publish to the world, that my mischievous proceedings may be the glory of his filial piety, the only reward now left for so great merit."

What afterwards happened to the persons of the tale need not be given here, as the Poet made no use of it. Suffice it to say that the Prince finally recovered the throne, and the brothers were reconciled, so that all came to a happy conclusion.

General Characteristics of the Play.

A good deal of irrelevant criticism has been spent upon the circumstance that in the details and costume of this play the Poet did not hold himself to the date of the forecited legend. That date was some nine hundred years before Christ ; yet the play abounds in the manners, sentiments, and allusions of modern England. Malone is scandalized that Edgar in the play should speak of Nero, while the old chroniclers place Lear's reign upwards of eight hundred years before the birth of that gentleman. The painstaking Mr. Douce, also, is in dire distress at the Poet's blunder in substituting the manners of England under the Tudors for those of the ancient Britons.

Now to make these points, or such as these, any ground of impeachment, is to mistake totally the nature and design of the work. For the drama is not, nor was meant to be, in any sense of the term a history : it is a tragedy, and nothing else ; and as such is as free of chronological circumscriptions as human nature itself. The historical or legendary matter, be it more or less, neither shapes nor guides the structure of the piece, but is used in entire subservience to the general ends of tragic representation. The play, therefore, does not fall within the lines of any jurisdiction for settling dates ; it is amenable to no laws but those of Art, any more than if it were entirely of the Poet's own creation : its true whereabouts is in the reader's mind ; and the only proper question is, whether it keeps to the laws of this whereabouts ; in which reference it will probably stand the severest inquisitions that criticism has strength to prosecute.

This I take to be an ample vindication of the play not only from the aforesaid criticisms, but from any others of like