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Prologue to *King Lear* - The Enigma of Shakespeare

Only a small percentage of the plays (some seven hundred) written during the Golden Age of Elizabethan drama (1590-1610) survive into print (Nolan 30). Popular drama in the 1580s existed as no more than the street professions of clowns and jugglers performing the occasional dramatic interlude (Nolan 35). As with the "bohemian" and "hippie" youth movements in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other American cities during the sixties, bands of reckless youth with working-class and college educations invaded the London urban underworld and street culture in the latter half of the sixteenth century, living mostly by their own wits and talents. In their early careers, they wrote for local actors of street plays, much like the early Beatles, Roy Orbison, Willie Nelson and Buddy Holly wrote material for other more popular performers in Liverpool and Nashville before they received their big break in the business (Rinehart). The new lyric of age expresses a realism and candor rarely seen in previous street ballads. William Shakespeare describes love as a steadfast and dedicated event that endures despite all temporal hardship (lines 4-5). Employing the vagabond actors and performers living in the poorer back streets of London, they kindled an age of dramatic art that blazed for one single twenty-year episode, leaving only a few names like Shakespeare etched in the minds of middle-class London merchants and consumers of that age ("Elizabethan London").

As Elizabethan drama blazed only briefly, few intellectuals paid specific attention to the plays during the years of their performance (Folgeroy); the critics of the time scoffed at them (Hall 2: 126). Future scholars of drama appreciated the Elizabethan era only as they were raking over the ashes of a vanished art form (Ardath, "Searching"). Even Shakespeare had no candid

biographer to chronicle the important details of his life (*Who was Shakespeare?*). Only a few church records survive with his name spelled six or seven different ways in a time long before a stable language and dictionaries ("Elizabethan English"). Only a few rough folios of lines to his plays written down some twenty years after his death endure beyond his epoch. Surviving stage-notes indicate that he had created some characters for the talents of specific but now nameless actors and actresses (Evans and Williford 86) - "A kingdom for a stage" (*H5* 1.3), a deluge afterwards, washing away any memory of the man Shakespeare into oblivion. We trace his life and art only through the poetry and drama attributed to him.

Since the development of modern English in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each generation has revered the characters created by Shakespeare, despite the constraints of Elizabethan dramatic style and language (Collins). Over-studied and over-simplified in many high school English classes in America, his characters pass into our culture "to be or not be" (*Ham.* 3.25), as it were, vital to our own modern predicament (Abernathy). As the Shakespearian actress Diana Riggs once illuminated, modern readers with ears dull to the Elizabethan tongue, accustomed to American "fast-food" English and decidedly unaccustomed to Shakespeare's flowery and obsolete speeches, fail to understand the profound spectacle of King Lear as his fate merges before them on the modern stage (*Mute*). A British critic of Shakespeare once noted that *King Lear* studies the wages of personal and political power, transforming "brutal arrogance" into madness and then "divine humility" (Smith). If so, then accounts appear no less true about Shakespeare's own artistic powers, which, at the age of 37, produced the brutal visage and behavior of Hamlet and then developed a series of dark characters, culminating with the broken, mad character of Lear (Recome). Following his early plays, which juxtaposed the hardened boyish wisdom of *Henry V* and the fantasy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this enigmatic "dark period" of Shakespeare's life saw the creation of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus* and *King Lear* (*The Later Shakespeare*). Despite the ardent claims of

nineteenth-century Romantics that a tragic personal experience prefaces the advance of Shakespeare's tragic power, no substantial proof exists for this mood in his work (Allen 82); however, a dark mood permeates his writing in this period.

The reader feels a dark strain, a far off-sound ... from dreaded histories, of great men and women caught in an older web of Destiny, wrecked by some flaw in themselves, or rendered helpless amid a crushing environment of evil, and swept down by terrible non-human forces on the remorseless flood of fate. (Smith)

The setting of *King Lear* appears grim and dark, a world of terror and strangeness, harboring Lear's struggle with his own nature and ending in insanity and death (Ardath, "Geilgud").

Despite the edification of a tale from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (44), the tragic character of Lear overpowers the psyche of playwright, actors and audience. The intense level of tragic pathos and comedy running through the dialogue between Lear and his Fool remains unrivaled in the history of drama (Benatar 114; Smith), and scholars of drama still consider the awakening of Lear from his madness Shakespeare's greatest dramatic achievement.

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