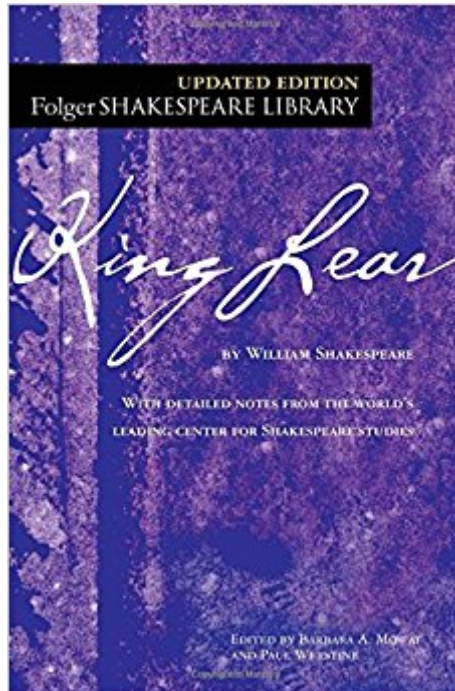


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# King Lear



## Synopsis

Shakespeare's King Lear challenges us with the magnitude, intensity, and sheer duration of the pain that it represents. Its figures harden their hearts, engage in violence, or try to alleviate the suffering of others. Lear himself rages until his sanity cracks. What, then, keeps bringing us back to King Lear? For all the force of its language, King Lear is almost equally powerful when translated, suggesting that it is the story, in large part, that draws us to the play. The play tells us about families struggling between greed and cruelty, on the one hand, and support and consolation, on the other. Emotions are extreme, magnified to gigantic proportions. We also see old age portrayed in all its vulnerability, pride, and, perhaps, wisdom—one reason this most devastating of Shakespeare's tragedies is also perhaps his most moving. The authoritative edition of King Lear from The Folger Shakespeare Library, the trusted and widely used Shakespeare series for students and general readers, includes: -Freshly edited text based on the best early printed version of the play -Full explanatory notes conveniently placed on pages facing the text of the play -Scene-by-scene plot summaries -A key to the play's famous lines and phrases -An introduction to reading Shakespeare's language -An essay by a leading Shakespeare scholar providing a modern perspective on the play -Fresh images from the Folger Shakespeare Library's vast holdings of rare books -An annotated guide to further reading

Essay by Susan Snyder The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, is home to the world's largest collection of Shakespeare's printed works, and a magnet for Shakespeare scholars from around the globe. In addition to exhibitions open to the public throughout the year, the Folger offers a full calendar of performances and programs. For more information, visit [Folger.edu](http://Folger.edu).

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## Customer Reviews

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon, on England's Avon River. When he was eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway. The couple had three children—an older daughter Susanna and twins, Judith and Hamnet. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died in childhood. The bulk of Shakespeare's working life was spent in the theater world of London, where he established himself professionally by the early 1590s. He enjoyed success not only as a playwright and poet, but also as an actor and shareholder in an acting company. Although some think that sometime between 1610 and 1613 Shakespeare retired from the theater and returned home to Stratford, where he died in 1616, others believe that he may have continued to work in London until close to his death. Barbara A. Mowat is Director of Research emerita at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Consulting Editor of Shakespeare Quarterly, and author of *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances* and of essays on Shakespeare's plays and their editing. Paul Werstine is Professor of English at the Graduate School and at King's University College at Western University. He is a general editor of the *New Variorum Shakespeare* and author of *Early Modern Playhouse Manuscripts and the Editing of Shakespeare* and of many papers and articles on the printing and editing of Shakespeare's plays.

**Shakespeare's Life** Surviving documents that give us glimpses into the life of William Shakespeare show us a playwright, poet, and actor who grew up in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, spent his professional life in London, and returned to Stratford a wealthy landowner. He was born in April 1564, died in April 1616, and is buried inside the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. We wish we could know more about the life of the world's greatest dramatist. His plays and poems are testaments to his wide reading -- especially to his knowledge of Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch, Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and the Bible -- and to his mastery of the English language, but we can only speculate about his education. We know that the King's New School in Stratford-upon-Avon was considered excellent. The school was one of the English "grammar schools" established to educate young men, primarily in Latin grammar and literature. As in other schools of the time, students began their studies at the age of four or five in the attached "petty school," and there learned to read and write

in English, studying primarily the catechism from the Book of Common Prayer. After two years in the petty school, students entered the lower form (grade) of the grammar school, where they began the serious study of Latin grammar and Latin texts that would occupy most of the remainder of their school days. (Several Latin texts that Shakespeare used repeatedly in writing his plays and poems were texts that schoolboys memorized and recited.) Latin comedies were introduced early in the lower form; in the upper form, which the boys entered at age ten or eleven, students wrote their own Latin orations and declamations, studied Latin historians and rhetoricians, and began the study of Greek using the Greek New Testament. Since the records of the Stratford "grammar school" do not survive, we cannot prove that William Shakespeare attended the school; however, every indication (his father's position as an alderman and bailiff of Stratford, the playwright's own knowledge of the Latin classics, scenes in the plays that recall grammar-school experiences -- for example, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 4.1) suggests that he did. We also lack generally accepted documentation about Shakespeare's life after his schooling ended and his professional life in London began. His marriage in 1582 (at age eighteen) to Anne Hathaway and the subsequent births of his daughter Susanna (1583) and the twins Judith and Hamnet (1585) are recorded, but how he supported himself and where he lived are not known. Nor do we know when and why he left Stratford for the London theatrical world, nor how he rose to be the important figure in that world that he had become by the early 1590s. We do know that by 1592 he had achieved some prominence in London as both an actor and a playwright. In that year was published a book by the playwright Robert Greene attacking an actor who had the audacity to write blank-verse drama and who was "in his own conceit [i.e., opinion] the only Shake-scene in a country." Since Greene's attack includes a parody of a line from one of Shakespeare's early plays, there is little doubt that it is Shakespeare to whom he refers, a "Shake-scene" who had aroused Greene's fury by successfully competing with university-educated dramatists like Greene himself. It was in 1593 that Shakespeare became a published poet. In that year he published his long narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*; in 1594, he followed it with *The Rape of Lucrece*. Both poems were dedicated to the young earl of Southampton (Henry Wriothesley), who may have become Shakespeare's patron. It seems no coincidence that Shakespeare wrote these narrative poems at a time when the theaters were closed because of the plague, a contagious epidemic disease that devastated the population of London. When the theaters reopened in 1594, Shakespeare apparently resumed his double career of actor and playwright and began his long (and seemingly profitable) service as an acting-company shareholder. Records for December of 1594 show him to be a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men. It was this company of actors, later named the King's Men, for whom he would

be a principal actor, dramatist, and shareholder for the rest of his career. So far as we can tell, that career spanned about twenty years. In the 1590s, he wrote his plays on English history as well as several comedies and at least two tragedies (Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet). These histories, comedies, and tragedies are the plays credited to him in 1598 in a work, *Palladis Tamia*, that in one chapter compares English writers with "Greek, Latin, and Italian Poets." There the author, Francis Meres, claims that Shakespeare is comparable to the Latin dramatists Seneca for tragedy and Plautus for comedy, and calls him "the most excellent in both kinds for the stage." He also names him "Mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare": "I say," writes Meres, "that the Muses would speak with Shakespeare's fine filed phrase, if they would speak English." Since Meres also mentions Shakespeare's "sugared sonnets among his private friends," it is assumed that many of Shakespeare's sonnets (not published until 1609) were also written in the 1590s. In 1599, Shakespeare's company built a theater for themselves across the river from London, naming it the Globe. The plays that are considered by many to be Shakespeare's major tragedies (Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth) were written while the company was resident in this theater, as were such comedies as *Twelfth Night* and *Measure for Measure*. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed at court (both for Queen Elizabeth I and, after her death in 1603, for King James I), some were presented at the Inns of Court (the residences of London's legal societies), and some were doubtless performed in other towns, at the universities, and at great houses when the King's Men went on tour; otherwise, his plays from 1599 to 1608 were, so far as we know, performed only at the Globe. Between 1608 and 1612, Shakespeare wrote several plays -- among them *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* -- presumably for the company's new indoor Blackfriars theater, though the plays seem to have been performed also at the Globe and at court. Surviving documents describe a performance of *The Winter's Tale* in 1611 at the Globe, for example, and performances of *The Tempest* in 1611 and 1613 at the royal palace of Whitehall. Shakespeare wrote very little after 1612, the year in which he probably wrote *King Henry VIII*. (It was at a performance of *Henry VIII* in 1613 that the Globe caught fire and burned to the ground.) Sometime between 1610 and 1613 he seems to have returned to live in Stratford-upon-Avon, where he owned a large house and considerable property, and where his wife and his two daughters and their husbands lived. (His son Hamnet had died in 1596.) During his professional years in London, Shakespeare had presumably derived income from the acting company's profits as well as from his own career as an actor, from the sale of his play manuscripts to the acting company, and, after 1599, from his shares as an owner of the Globe. It was presumably that income, carefully invested in land and other property, which made him the wealthy man that surviving documents show him to have become. It is also

assumed that William Shakespeare's growing wealth and reputation played some part in inclining the crown, in 1596, to grant John Shakespeare, William's father, the coat of arms that he had so long sought. William Shakespeare died in Stratford on April 23, 1616 (according to the epitaph carved under his bust in Holy Trinity Church) and was buried on April 25. Seven years after his death, his collected plays were published as Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies (the work now known as the First Folio). The years in which Shakespeare wrote were among the most exciting in English history. Intellectually, the discovery, translation, and printing of Greek and Roman classics were making available a set of works and worldviews that interacted complexly with Christian texts and beliefs. The result was a questioning, a vital intellectual ferment, that provided energy for the period's amazing dramatic and literary output and that fed directly into Shakespeare's plays. The Ghost in Hamlet, for example, is wonderfully complicated in part because he is a figure from Roman tragedy -- the spirit of the dead returning to seek revenge -- who at the same time inhabits a Christian hell (or purgatory); Hamlet's description of humankind reflects at one moment the Neoplatonic wonderment at mankind ("What a piece of work is a man!") and, at the next, the Christian disparagement of human sinners ("And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"). As intellectual horizons expanded, so also did geographical and cosmological horizons. New worlds -- both North and South America -- were explored, and in them were found human beings who lived and worshiped in ways radically different from those of Renaissance Europeans and Englishmen. The universe during these years also seemed to shift and expand. Copernicus had earlier theorized that the earth was not the center of the cosmos but revolved as a planet around the sun. Galileo's telescope, created in 1609, allowed scientists to see that Copernicus had been correct; the universe was not organized with the earth at the center, nor was it so nicely circumscribed as people had, until that time, thought. In terms of expanding horizons, the impact of these discoveries on people's beliefs -- religious, scientific, and philosophical -- cannot be overstated. London, too, rapidly expanded and changed during the years (from the early 1590s to around 1610) that Shakespeare lived there. London -- the center of England's government, its economy, its royal court, its overseas trade -- was, during these years, becoming an exciting metropolis, drawing to... --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Like I say about all Shakespeare: the Arden versions are my favorite. I own about a third of the Canon in them already. The footnotes are my favorite parts about it, and they're great because I don't have to carry my Lexicon around everywhere. King Lear is a brilliant play, all around. Between the family ties, the love and lust, and just the crazy existential dialogue, it's just a great read

all-around.

I'm a fan of the layout of Folger Shakespeare Library. The covers are also beautiful, but the play on the right, explanation of archaic terms on the left style is very helpful to the reader and makes getting into Shakespeare much easier. King Lear is a great tragedy. It is very enjoyable.

This 'interpretation' alongside the original makes for much easier reading, while making the original so readily available also gives one the 'texture' of how the original felt. There is so much meaning and so much feeling contained in this play that the interpretation is essential unless one is able to interpret all the old English terms by oneself. So, I will certainly purchase further editions by this author's interpretations for more appreciation of the many plays of Shakespeare.

Every time I read this or watch this perform I feel changed. This edition is small, beautiful, and great. I have many of the plays in this edition, though truly the play is what makes me rate this so high. An exploration of madness, family, old age, and so much more. Read it and weep.

Was an AP English summer reading assignment. Read the Sparknotes after. Not my typical choice of text, but it is a classic

This is a welcome addition to my growing Folger library at home. Thank you!

Every time I re-read Lear I'm amazed at just how much pain and sorrow we must endure in life. This Folger Library edition makes the language easily comprehensible. One can read straight through without difficulty, which restores the tension and flow to the action.

Excellent collection of essays that enable students to consider the play in its historical context.

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