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CRITICAL HISTORY

CONTEXT

The real King Leir lived 800 years BC, in a pagan era.

King Lear has enjoyed a rich critical history. This section offers an overview of some of the ideas that have exercised the minds of writers and scholars over the past three centuries.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

During Shakespeare's lifetime *King Lear* does not appear to have been as successful as *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. We can presume the play was well received, however, because it was performed at court for James I. Thereafter, for the rest of the seventeenth century, it seems to have been ignored. After the Restoration, *King Lear* was rewritten by Nahum Tate in 1681. Tate felt that the ending was far too gloomy. He also felt that the structure of the play was disorganised. His version of *King Lear* includes a happy ending (Lear does not die) and a romance between Edgar and Cordelia.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

Two noteworthy eighteenth-century critics agreed with Tate's assessment of *King Lear* as faulty. In 1753 Joseph Wharton objected to the Gloucester subplot as unlikely and distracting, and reckoned Gloucester's blinding too horrid to be exhibited on the stage. Wharton also found Gonerill and Regan's savagery too diabolical to be credible. While he accepted the way in which 'the wicked prosper and the virtuous miscarry' because it was 'a just representation of the common events of human life', Samuel Johnson (1768) took Shakespeare to task for the lack of justice at the end of *King Lear*. He found Cordelia's death deeply shocking. These early critics were on sound territory; scholars are still arguing about the savagery in *King Lear*, and whether or not justice exists in the world of the play.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CRITICISM

Moving on to the nineteenth century, we find a range of views, although critics agreed that the play was harsh. Charles Lamb (1811) thought *King Lear* unactable. August Wilhelm Schlegel (1808) saw a drama in which 'the science of compassion is exhausted': 'humanity is stripped of all external and internal advantages, and given up prey to naked helplessness'. William Hazlitt (1817) noted the 'giddy anarchy' of *King Lear*, and the way in which the unnatural comes to dominate. However, Hazlitt also believed that Shakespeare showed a 'firm faith in filial piety'. Again, all these ideas have been taken up by contemporary critics; suffering, anarchy, bleakness, faith, and the topic that obsesses Lear so much – the behaviour of children.

At the end of the century the poet Swinburne (1880) was struck by the dark fatalism of Shakespeare's vision. 'Requital, redemption, amends, equity, pity and mercy are words without a meaning here'. Other Victorian critics saw grandeur and strength in the play, and Lear continued to trouble and move them. *King Lear* was now recognised as a great literary achievement. For George Brandes (1895), Cordelia was 'the living emblem of womanly dignity', while the play as a whole portrayed 'the titanic tragedy of human life; there rings forth from it a chorus of passionate jeering, wildly yearning, and desperate wailing voices'. The sense of despair Brandes identifies here continued to be important to twentieth-century critics.

EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CRITICISM

There were many movements in literary criticism during the twentieth century, with each new discipline rejecting or reworking the ideas of previous critics. A range of conflicting views of *King Lear* emerged. A major development in Shakespearean criticism came with the publication of A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1905. Bradley believed that it was possible to understand a text and the playwright's intentions through close reading. He focused



CHECK THE BOOK

For a reading of the play as a Christian parable of sacrifice and salvation, see A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1992.

BACKGROUND

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE

There are no personal records of Shakespeare's life. Official documents and occasional references to him by contemporary dramatists enable us to draw the main outline of his public life, but his private life remains hidden. Although not at all unusual for a writer of his time, this lack of first-hand evidence has tempted many to read his plays as personal records and to look in them for clues to Shakespeare's character and convictions. The results are unconvincing, partly because Renaissance art was not subjective or designed primarily to express its creator's personality, and partly because the drama of any period is very difficult to read biographically. Except when plays are written by committed dramatists to promote social or political causes (as by Shaw or Brecht), it is all but impossible to decide who amongst the variety of fictional characters in a drama represents the dramatist, or which of the various and often conflicting points of view expressed is authorial.

What we do know can be quickly summarised. Shakespeare was born into a well-to-do family in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, where he was baptised, in Holy Trinity Church, on 26 April 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous glover and leather merchant who became a person of some importance in the town: in 1565 he was elected an alderman of the town, and in 1568 he became high bailiff (or mayor) of Stratford. In 1557 he had married Mary Arden. Their third child (of eight) and eldest son, William, learned to read and write at the primary (or 'petty') school in Stratford and then, it seems probable, attended the local grammar school, where he would have studied Latin, history, logic and rhetoric. In November 1582 William, then aged eighteen, married Anne Hathaway, who was twenty-six years old. They had a daughter, Susanna, in May 1583, and twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585.



CHECK THE BOOK

There are a number of biographies of Shakespeare – many of them very speculative – but the most authoritative is still Samuel Schoenbaum's *Shakespeare: A Documentary Life* (1975).

Shakespeare next appears in the historical record in 1592 when he is mentioned as a London actor and playwright in a pamphlet by the dramatist Robert Greene. These 'lost years' 1585–92 have been the subject of much speculation, but how they were occupied remains as much a mystery as when Shakespeare left Stratford, and why. In his pamphlet, *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, Greene expresses to his fellow dramatists his outrage that the 'upstart crow' Shakespeare has the impudence to believe he 'is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you'. To have aroused this hostility from a rival, Shakespeare must, by 1592, have been long enough in London to have made a name for himself as a playwright. We may conjecture that he had left Stratford in 1586 or 1587.

During the next twenty years, Shakespeare continued to live in London, regularly visiting his wife and family in Stratford. He continued to act, but his chief fame was as a dramatist. From 1594 he wrote exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which rapidly became the leading dramatic company and from 1603 enjoyed the patronage of James I as the King's Men. His plays were extremely popular and he became a shareholder in his theatre company. He was able to buy lands around Stratford and a large house in the town, to which he retired about 1611. He died there on 23 April 1616 and was buried in Holy Trinity Church on 25 April.

SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC CAREER

Between the late 1580s and 1613 Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays, and contributed to some by other dramatists. This was by no means an exceptional number for a professional playwright of the times. The exact date of the composition of individual plays is a matter of debate – the date of first performance is known for only a few plays – but the broad outlines of Shakespeare's dramatic career have been established. He began in the late 1580s and early 1590s by rewriting earlier plays and working with plotlines inspired by the Classics. He concentrated on comedies (such as *The Comedy of Errors*, 1590–4, which derived from the Latin playwright Plautus) and plays dealing with English history (such as the three parts of *Henry VI*, 1589–92), though he also tried his hand at bloodthirsty revenge tragedy (*Titus Andronicus*, 1592–3, indebted to both Ovid and Seneca). During the 1590s Shakespeare developed his expertise



You can read Shakespeare's will in his own handwriting – and in modern transcription – online at the Public Records Office: <http://www.pro.gov.uk/virtualmuseum> and search for 'Shakespeare'.