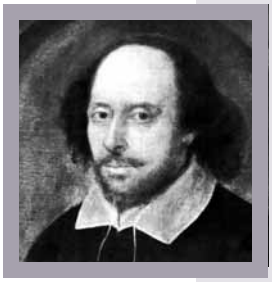
The Lear Legend

From Geoffrey of Monmouth's Leir to Shakespeare's King Lear and beyond



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The legendary Leir (or King Lear as we know him today) first appeared in literature in a work by Geoffrey, Bishop of Monmouth, who flourished in the first half of the twelfth century, dying in 1155. His Latin **Historia Regum Britanniae** (c.1138) claims to chronicle the kings who lived in Britain from the time of Brutus. This fabled founder of the British race was the progenitor of Bladud, father of Leir, Gorboduc, Cymbeline and many others. The most notable of these in terms of sustained literary influence is Arthur whose legend continues to flourish, spawning countless books, heroic and romantic dramas, children's stories and film treatments (including one - **King Arthur** - which has only just been released).

The kings of Britain

Geoffrey's **History of the kings of Britain** stretches up to the death of Cadwallader in 689 and constitutes the first written account of what later scholars were to call the 'matter of Britain'. Despite its questionable status as history, this body of material - part myth, part legend, part history and part perhaps pure invention - has proved a source of inspiration for a surprisingly large number of writers from the twelfth through to the twenty-first century.

Though the legend of Leir cannot compete in influence with the vast output of writings indebted to Arthurian legend, it too has engendered an uninterrupted line of literary treatments. This spans the period from Geoffrey, through Wace and Layamon to the Elizabethans (including the chronicler Holinshed) and Augustans, right down to the present. This most important link in this unbroken chain of transmission is Raphael Holinshed (died c.1580) who compiled **The chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland** (1577). This work, together with the **Chronicles** (1542) of Edward Hall (1499-1547), became a valuable source for Shakespeare.

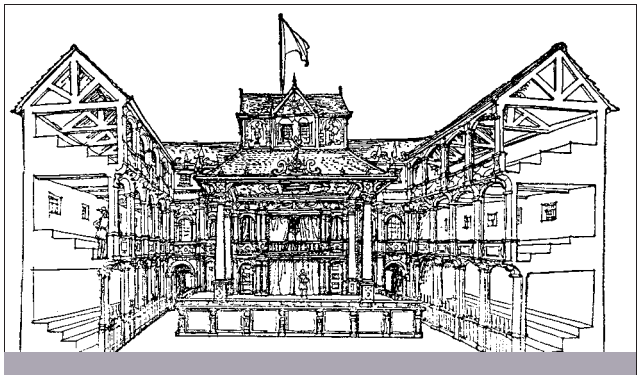
Contemporary treatments

The persistent attraction of the Leir story, and each new generation's fascination with it, is attested to not only by regular - often experimental - productions of Shakespeare's **King Lear** both in English and translation, but by numerous treatments of the theme in our own day. The contemporary British playwright, Edward Bond, for one, produced his own highly individual version - entitled simply **Lear** - in 1971, while the Japanese director Akira Kurosawa released a stylised cinematic representation of the theme in 1986. Entitled **Ran** - which means chaos - Kurosawa's film demonstrates the exceptionally pliable nature of the Lear tale by adapting it to a Samurai context.

*Above: Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's stylised cinematic representation (1986) of the Lear tale is entitled **Ran** and tells the story in a Samurai context*

*Above left: The tense opening scene of Peter Brook's film **King Lear** (1971) in which the scenes of violence are savagely treated*

Left: The Russian film directed by Grigori Kozintsev (1971) has overtones of communism woven into the tale of King Lear



Top: The Fortune Theatre was built in 1600, one year later than the Globe, and burnt down in 1621

Above: The Globe Theatre at which most of Shakespeare's plays were performed although he was also associated with the Swan and the Rose theatres

Another example of the adaptability of the story is acclaimed novelist Jane Smiley's use of it in her novel, **A thousand acres** (1992). This best-selling work garnered numerous honours, including the Pulitzer Prize and the American National Book Critics' Circle Award. Set in modern-day Iowa, **A thousand acres** centres on Larry Cook who suddenly decides to hand his farm over to his three daughters. While the two older women and their husbands are startled by this decision, they see no reason to criticise the idea. The youngest daughter, Caroline, on the other hand, questions the wisdom of her father's impulse and is cut out of the arrangement.

This plot outline indicates clearly Smiley's debt to Shakespeare's **King Lear**, but the working out of this Midwestern family tragedy is thoroughly contemporary and convincing. The more closely one studies the text, the more one recognises the freshness and subtlety of the way in which Smiley handles parallels between her modern reworking of a venerable legend and Shakespeare's interpretation. (Unfortunately the 1997 film adaptation of **A thousand acres**, directed by Joselyn Moorhouse, is a much cruder affair and deteriorates into a rather weak vehicle for feminist polemic.)

What is of note is the undiminished power of the original tale which Smiley so ably demonstrates. Geoffrey himself gives an account of the Leir legend that is so simple, forceful and clear that the details of the action have survived substantially unchanged. When changes have been made these have been deliberately incorporated - notably by Shakespeare - with specific dramatic effects in mind. But the version of the legend inherited by succeeding generations of English writers was in all salient particulars identical to Geoffrey of Monmouth's. This does not mean, of course, that all treatments have been equally successful. An early dramatisation, for instance, which closely followed the outline given by Geoffrey of Monmouth has none of Shakespeare's keen theatrical sense nor his ear for language. It was produced in 1594 and published in 1605 under the rather cumbersome title, **The true chronicle history of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan and Cordella**.

Geoffrey himself must intuitively have felt the dramatic potential of the material, for he gives considerable space to Leir's history (over six close-printed pages in modern type), and dwells at some length on Leir's suffering. Adding further vitality to the account are passages of direct speech which reveal inklings of conscious character delineation. This is especially true of Leir's lament for past glory as he makes the crossing from England to Gallia to seek help from the daughter he has so arbitrarily rejected.

'O you Fates', he cries,
'why did you ever raise me up to happiness
only to snatch it away from me again?
It is even more miserable to sit thinking
of past success than to bear the
burden of subsequent failure.'
(Translation by Lewis Thorpe, Part 2, ii.)

Order of events

It may be useful to pause for a moment here to outline the order of events as told by Geoffrey, since, as I say, this version remained substantially unchanged until Shakespeare reshaped the material into what is surely one of English literature's greatest achievements. The old folk-tale of the king with three daughters who demanded to know how much each loved him is common to many cultures. In this early fable the first daughter compares her love to honey, the second to sugar and the third to salt. The foolish king is dissatisfied with this third daughter's response and marries her off to a poor passer-by. In some versions he recognises his mistake when he is presented with a dish prepared without salt. As he tastes the flavourless food he realises the significance of what his youngest daughter has said and comes belatedly to apprehend the value of her declaration.

Geoffrey of Monmouth attributes the incident to Leir - sixth king after Brutus - who reigned in the eighth century before Christ. When Leir had been king for 60 years, Geoffrey tells us (though Holinshed says 40 years), he decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and to marry them to nobles capable of sharing in the rule of the kingdom. Meaning to give the finest share to the daughter who loves him the most, Leir questions first Gonorilla, then Ragau, who both answer him extravagantly. Well satisfied, the credulous Leir agrees to give each a third of his kingdom and to marry them with all due pomp to the men of their choice. His third and favourite daughter, Cordeilla, is not capable of the falsehoods perpetrated by her sisters, and when her turn comes to say how much she loves Leir, she answers simply that she loves him just as much as is due to him as her father. Infuriated at this moderate reply Leir rejects Cordeilla, sending her off without ceremony or dowry to marry Aganippus of Gallia. The other daughters are married to the dukes Maglaurus and Henwinus. Leir divides the kingdom in two, giving one half to his children to share and retaining the rule of the other half, with the promise that after his death Gonorilla and Regau will inherit the entire kingdom.

After a period of peace the two dukes rise up against Leir and usurp his half of the kingdom, but Maglaurus agrees to maintain Leir together with a retinue of 140 knights. After two years, however, Gonorilla objects to the quarrels between her own and her father's retainers and commands the old king to reduce his retinue to thirty. Furious at this insult, Leir appeals to Henwinus who receives him honourably. Before a year has passed, though, more quarrels break out and Regau orders Leir to dismiss all but five of his men. Leir returns to Gonorilla who is more adamant than before, insisting that he needs no more than one attendant. At this Leir sets out for the Continent to appeal to his youngest daughter who sends gold and silver to her father. Only when he has recovered from his journey and been suitably dressed and equipped with a retinue of forty armed knights is he received by Aganippus and Cordeilla who immediately raise an army to restore his kingdom to Leir.

The story as Geoffrey of Monmouth tells it has a distinctly moral flavour: the forces of evil are ousted and those of good in the persons of Leir and Cordeilla are vindicated. Leir is re-installed as king, ruling for three years before his death. When Aganippus also dies, Cordeilla becomes queen of Britain and rules for five years until her nephews rise up against her and seize the throne. The country is thrown into civil strife; Cordeilla, imprisoned after a series of battles, loses heart and kills herself. However, this eventual conclusion does not alter the fact that for eight years evil has been subdued and good has dominated.

Layamon's *The Brut*

The next time we encounter the Leir story in England is in Layamon's **The Brut**, probably the most important work in the early Middle English period. Dating from about 1205, **The Brut** is the first rendering in English of 'the matter of Britain', endorsing the inherent literary quality of this 'matter' by rendering it in verse. Though Layamon covers in expanded form the same ground as Geoffrey of Monmouth, his chief source was Wace's French **Roman de Brut** which was in turn a verse translation of Geoffrey's **History of the kings of Britain**. Here the story of Leir and his daughters is unified by a recurring counterpoint of lies and truth, but more importantly by repeated formulaic references of Leir's retinue. These repetitions work in a way not dissimilar to that of the incremental refrain in certain ballads. It is through the 'refrain', in fact, that the waning of Leir's fortunes is reflected. The formula is repeated (11.3272-6) when Layamon describes how Leir visited Scotland where he was received 'with much fairness' and given 'all that him behoved'. Soon, however, Gornoille objects to this extravagance, demanding that his retinue be cut; in her scornful recital of Leir's privileges the formula now takes on a note of bitter resentment. Regan is no less resentful, and quickly suggests that Leir's diminished retinue of thirty knights be cut to ten, while Cornwall considers five sufficient. Leir woefully returns to Gornoille with only five knights, but after four days she swears that one knight should be adequate.

In desperation Leir now turns to Cordoille, and it is here that the formulaic refrain is again taken up with dramatic effect. When Cordoille hears of her father's plight she gives orders to equip the old king with rich clothes, food and lodgings, and she promises him hawks, hounds, horses and a retinue of forty knights, echoing the formulaic refrain (11.3560-3). Through this refrain, then, various episodes of the long narrative are organically linked and the main point of contention is poetically highlighted. For the retinue symbolises not only Leir's dignity as former king, but his daughters' gratitude (or in this case ingratitude) for his generosity. The handling of repeated formulas here and elsewhere in **The Brut** represents a poetic advance on Old English formulaic usage, and indicates a poet possessing a creative understanding of his material and form.

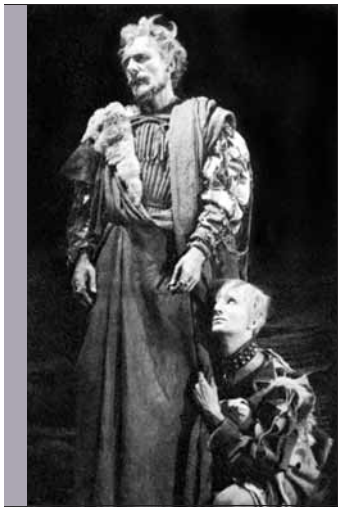
Though the story of Leir as told by Layamon does not achieve the dramatic intensity of Shakespeare's rendering, it does have moments of concentrated emotion, as in the passage where Leir recognises the contrast between his former riches and present bereftness (11.3415/22). Not long ago, not even two years ago, Leir was rich and honoured, now he sits 'bare of possessions' and, like the Old English Wanderer before him, he contemplates the transience of earthly glory. His expression of sorrow is a very faint prefiguring indeed of the 'unaccommodated' Lear of Shakespeare, nor does it have anything like the cosmic

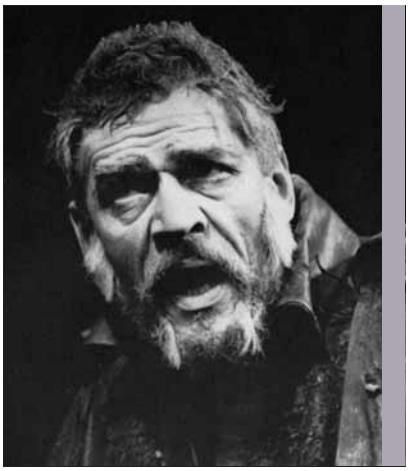
*Above: An artist's impression of David Garrick in the storm scene of **King Lear** (1743)*

Left: Donald Wolfit as King Lear in 1942

Right: John Gielgud as King Lear and Alan Badel as the Fool, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon 1950

Below: Paul Scofield as King Lear, Aldwych Theatre 1962





resonance of Lear's suffering, but it does evoke a sense of loss which extends beyond the immediate context to express a universal mutability.

Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon uses direct speech to highlight the drama of specific moments. His skill with this device is evident again in the battle scenes where it is used to convey the conflicting emotions experienced in war. The urge to conquer, the desire for revenge, the fear, courage and exultation of battle are all expressed through the speeches of leaders and their men in the midst of action. On occasion, too, Layamon communicates emotion through his sensitive descriptions of its outward or physical manifestations. When Cordoille hears of her father's plight, for instance, her deep shock is patent in her physical reaction (11.3526-9). She is stunned into complete stillness, and as the import of the news is borne in on her she turns as red (with both anger and shame one can assume) 'as if she had taken a draught of wine'. The tacit dismay and horror suggested here resemble in spirit if not in expression Cordelia's appalled outburst at the news of her sisters' cruelty:

Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire. And wast thou fain, poor father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw: Alack, alack,
'Tis wonder that thy life and wits, at once
Had not concluded all.
(IV,vii.)

Layamon, of course, never achieves the poetic heights exemplified in this passage and in **King Lear** as a whole. What does inform his treatment of Leir, however - and it also informs Geoffrey of Monmouth's briefer handling of the narrative - is a conscious awareness of its literary potential and a felt endeavour to render it as vividly and effectively as possible.

Holinshed's Chronicles

Shakespeare may or may not have seen the theatrical adaptation staged in 1594 and published in 1605. This play was probably based on Holinshed's **Chronicles** which recount the story in quick-moving, matter-of-fact prose, differing in detail very slightly from Geoffrey of Monmouth. He glosses over the matter of Leir's diminishing retinue, however, and ends with the reinstatement of Leir two years before his death. The succession of Cordeilla follows, and, as in Geoffrey's **History**, she reigns for five years until she is deposed by Margan and Cunedag, sons of Gonorilla and Regan. These nephews take her prisoner and, in Holinshed's words, 'laid hir fast in ward, wherewith she took such girefe, being a woman of manlie courage, and despairing to recover libertie, there she slue herself…'

None of the versions so far has revealed precisely *how* the deposed queen dies, but all are agreed that she commits suicide. In Spenser's portrayal - Book II of **The Faerie Queene** published in 1590 - he tells us that she died by hanging, but he too retains the idea of suicide: 'Till wearie of that wretched life, her selfe she hong.' It is a detail that Shakespeare appropriates, but he converts it to murder, making it the occasion not only of the most tragic moment in the play, but of the elderly Lear's amazing act of manly revenge: 'I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.' (V, iii.)

Spenser keeps essentially to the same storyline as Geoffrey and Layamon, though, like Holinshed, he also omits details of Leir's repeatedly reduced entourage. The surprising thing is that this poet, more usually associated with discursiveness, not to say verbosity, manages to condense the whole train of events into six highly concentrated stanzas without losing any of the main narrative elements. A poetic achievement indeed, and one that probably impressed Shakespeare since it is from Spenser that he borrowed not only the manner of Cordelia's death, but also the musical form of her name, so much more attractive than any of the forms used by the chroniclers.

Shakespeare's interpretation

In all the treatments of the material that preceded Shakespeare's play, the story ends happily with Lear receiving Cordelia's help to win back his throne. The general shape of the tale, as I've already suggested, is that of medieval morality with evil being punished and good eventually rewarded. This is the outline to which the playwright Nahum Tate (1652-1715) reverted in his **History of King Lear** which was first produced in 1681 and which kept Shakespeare's **King Lear** off the stage for a hundred years. Tate re-instates the morality contours of the narrative, ending his play with the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar. Though this might strike a modern audience as ludicrous, the 'King Lear with the happy ending' obviously had more appeal for the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than the bitter realities of Shakespeare's rendering. Even the great Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) defended it on the grounds that the original is too painful.

Consideration of additions and alterations to the sources serves to increase one's appreciation of Shakespeare's dramatic mastery. In most of the sources, for example, Leir's fortunes are seen to diminish gradually

after his division of the kingdom, usually over a period of more than two years. This is rejected by Shakespeare who gains immeasurably in immediacy and impact by showing Goneril and Regan intent on destroying Lear the very instant they are left alone after his banishment of Cordelia. We are still in the first scene of the first act of the play when the two agree to 'hit together', for, as Goneril says, 'if our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us'. (I, i.)

Just as Lear is blind to the malign forces which his banishment of Cordelia both precipitates and exemplifies, so in Shakespeare's sub-plot, based on a story in Sir Philip Sidney's **Arcadia** (Book II, Ch.10, 1590), Gloucester is blind to the perversity of Edmund. Like Lear, he fails in trust of his virtuous child, and like him he suffers out of all proportion to the magnitude of his error: 'More sinned against than sinning.' (III, ii.) In every respect the sub-plot serves as an awful descant to the central themes, adding to rather than diminishing the unity of the whole. In another important sense, too, the sub-plot is an inspired addition, for it heightens the tragedy by suggesting the hideous fate that overtakes not just Lear, but the country as a whole, once what should be the powers of justice fall into the hands of the unscrupulous. Seen alone, the cruelty meted out to Lear could be taken as a vile but isolated aberration; seen alongside the vicious treatment of another defenceless old man, that cruelty becomes emblematic of an all-pervading corruption within the state.

This corruption has its roots, ironically enough, in Lear himself, for in his unthinking and egocentric rejection of Cordelia he transgresses against nature itself. Both in Geoffrey of Monmouth's account and in Holinshed, only glancing reference is made to the idea that Cordelia is Lear's favourite child. Shakespeare chooses to lay particular emphasis on this preference for Cordelia - 'I loved her most', Lear says (I, i) - so that in servering his bond with her Lear falls, as Gloucester eloquently describes it, 'from bias of nature'. (I, ii.) In deliberately and irrationally acting against his deepest feelings and alienating himself from the daughter on whose 'kind nursery' he had hoped to 'set his rest' (I, i), Lear dislocates his very identity. This realisation fleetingly dawns on him during his first quarrel with Goneril:

O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!
Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature
From the fixed place… (I, iv.)

Lear's self-alienation, or wrenching of his nature from its fixed place, leads with an Aristotelian inevitability to the old king's madness, another addition of Shakespeare's. It is only when Lear is reconciled with Cordelia that he can be reconciled with himself, and so regain his sanity.

This reconciliation, which is common to all the sources, was regarded as the denouement of the story by everyone but Shakespeare. He alone failed to subscribe to the notion that it is not the playwright's task to present the punishment of innocence but to ensure poetic justice all round. Poetic justice would, in fact, have triumphed and dramatic credibility still been preserved had Shakespeare chosen to end King Lear with the reconciliation scene. The wicked have been punished by the time Edgar fatally wounds his scheming brother, and Edmund does try at the eleventh hour to make some weak amends for the suffering he has helped to cause. But his change of heart comes too late to save Cordelia. Quite clearly this was a deliberate decision on Shakespeare's part which completely alters the shape of the play from morality to profoundest tragedy.

Though Dryden claimed that 'the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; it is the most comic part of the whole play', it would take an audience of the most inveterate sadists to find anything risible in the awesome entrance of Lear bearing the dead body of Cordelia. Most of us are deeply shocked by the sight, no matter how familiar we may be with the play. The whole of the final scene, in fact, is almost too painful to read, much less to see enacted. Why then did Shakespeare diverge from his sources in so harrowing a manner, one may ask. The answer, I think, must be an epistemological one, for in the dramatisation of this ending to the story, Shakespeare sounds the final death-knell for a long-established way of understanding experience. In life, the play seems to contend, evil is not always punished nor virtue always rewarded, and man is often left standing helplessly by. This is not to suggest that Shakespeare denies a Divine purpose in human affairs, but simply that the human mind lacks the capacity to fathom such a purpose.

The whole philosophical stance of the tale is shifted in Shakespeare's rendering, which accounts for the dominantly interrogative style of the closing passages. It is from this philosophical standpoint that we can unequivocally dismiss Nahum Tate's reading for what it really is: no more than a sentimental evasion, a retrogression to moral certainties that Shakespeare insists do not and cannot exist. When Lear was reunited with Cordelia he looked forward - ironically - to their taking upon themselves 'the mystery of things'. In one horrific stroke that mystery has now burst in on Lear; instead of being 'God's spy' as he'd envisaged, though, he is overwhelmed by uncomprehending grief. The conception could hardly be further from Geoffrey of Monmouth's; what Shakespeare achieves is not merely the re-telling of an old tale, but the questioning of an entire moral order. This is dramatically epitomised in Lear's terrible cry,

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all? (V.iii.)

There is, of course, no answer to this anguished question, nor does Shakespeare attempt one. It is sufficient that he imbues it with a bafflement and desolation that extend far beyond Lear's personal sorrow to encompass all human suffering and pain, all human loss and incomprehension.

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