

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Shakespeare's King Lear: A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed. by Richard Knowles (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2020).

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King Lear has been called ‘the Everest’ of Shakespeare productions;¹ ‘a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare’s achievement’;² ‘not his best play’;³ and a play that ‘cannot be acted’.⁴ This powerful tragedy has divided opinion for centuries, but it has come to be accepted as a great stage play since the horrors of the Second World War. In fact, many readers and theatregoers, including myself, would now consider the play to be Shakespeare’s finest artistic achievement, and in Richard Knowles’s much-anticipated *Shakespeare's King Lear: A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, we have what amounts to the most detailed exploration of the play’s textual variants, critical controversies, source materials and influences, stage history, and adaptations ever conducted. The ‘promised end’ of decades of labour, Knowles’s edition is a landmark study and perhaps the most important edition of Shakespeare’s tragedy in scholarly history. I refer to ‘Knowles’ throughout this review for the sake of concision, but it should be acknowledged that this is a collaborative project: Kevin Donovan provides the history of *King Lear* criticism; Paula Glatzer explores the play’s stage history; and Denise Lamb offers a detailed index.

The New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare was founded by Horace Howard Furness in 1871, beginning with an edition of *Romeo and Juliet*. The purpose of the Variorum edition has always been to collect the work of various scholars, critics, and editors, and the level of detail in Knowles’s edition — divided, kingdom-like, into two volumes — makes it indispensable for anyone intending serious study of this play. I mentioned that

¹ Michael Billington, *The Guardian*, 29 March 1997.

² *King Lear: Arden Shakespeare Third Series*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 1.

³ John Russell Brown, *A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Concise Edition and Reassessment* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2007), p. 87.

⁴ Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles Lamb in Two Volumes* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1818), 2.25-6.

this edition has been eagerly anticipated by readers, and it is worth noting that the survey of scholarship concludes in the year 2000, indicating the time which has elapsed between the book's original composition and its publication. But it remains invaluable upon its publication over twenty years later as a comprehensive overview of centuries of critical perspectives and editorial conjectures. Knowles bases the edition primarily on the 1608 First Quarto edition of *King Lear*. The text in Volume 1, a 'modified diplomatic reprint derived from the Shakespeare Quarto Facsimile (1939) of Q1 and the Norton Facsimile of F1' (1.xvi), collated against and compared to various facsimile texts and records of press corrections, attempts to take readers as close to Shakespeare's original drafts as possible. A few instances of the edition's treatment of cruxes that have long beleaguered editors of this play will suffice: in Knowles's edition, Goneril says, 'My foote usurps my body' (l. 2297), in line with the uncorrected First Quarto reading, whereas most editors would be inclined to follow the Folio text in accepting 'the second element of Q1(c)'s A foole' (1.692). Goneril later states that Albany 'hast not in thy browes an eye deserving' (l. 2306), whereas modern editors unanimously adopt the Folio text's 'discerning'. In the same speech, Knowles retains the uncorrected Quarto reading, 'thy slayer', for the line, 'With plumed helme, thy slayer begin threats' (l. 2307+4), whereas virtually all editors adopt the corrected reading, 'thy state'. The confusing nature of this particular speech is exacerbated by the uncorrected Quarto phrase, 'begin threats'. This volume is not for general readers of Shakespeare's tragedy, but its detailed commentary and collation notes render it a phenomenal resource for textual scholars and future editors of the play.

Volume 2 consists of five pages of 'emendations made in the Variorum text where in Q1(u) and in about 110 additional lines from F1(u) an obvious typographical irregularity of no substantive importance has been rectified' (2.1017), followed by twenty pages of unadopted conjectural readings deriving from printed editions, commentaries, or manuscript sources. Knowles then attempts to define the 'nature and interrelationships of the texts in the first three printed editions of *King Lear*' (2.1042), i.e. the First Quarto (1608), or Q1, Second Quarto (1619), or Q2, and the First Folio text (1623), or F1. Knowles considers the quality of printing of Q1 and notes that 'Despite all the compositorial misreadings' in the text, 'the compositors made few typographical errors such as turned letters, inking spaces, and roman/italic wrong-font settings', suggesting that 'Many of their stylistic errors may be attributed to shortages of type' (2.1047). Noting that Q1 has sometimes been lumped together with so-called 'bad quartos', Knowles points out that 'the general quality of the text has long suffered from invidious comparison with that in the First Folio' (2.1062). He explores claims for 'aural errors', such as those that might be made if the text were 'taken down from dictation or during a performance' (2.1063), but considers them to be 'less than

compelling' (2.1065). Surveying various other theories concerning the copy for Q1, he concludes that the 'general consensus that an authorial rough draft, not yet annotated for theatrical use nor vetted by the censor, lies behind Q1' best explains the features of the text (2.1107).

Knowles explores the 'impression of F's theatrical origin', which is 'reinforced by many other signs that an authorial rough draft, such as the one that Q1 seems to be based upon, was cleaned and improved for theatrical purposes' (2.1152), and suggests that there are indications of 'some kind of influence of Q2 upon the text of F1' (2.1163). Having surveyed conflicting scholarly views on the evolution of these texts, Knowles offers a particularly valuable summary. He proposes that a rough draft of the play lies behind Q1 and was 'almost certainly not the manuscript that the company accepted as the basis of their 1606 playbook; instead they apparently received a clean transcript, probably made by a scribe' (2.1198), from whom Stationers John Busby and Nathaniel Butters received the draft. This would mean that the printer Nicholas Okes's 'first quarto edition of *Lr.* brings us as close to a Shn. manuscript as we are likely to get' (2.1199). The fair copy of the play would have been reduced in length for playing purposes, and some of these cuts survived into the text of F1. Knowles considers the theory that 'F1 represents Sh.'s own revision of the play' to be 'incapable of proof' and 'improbable' (2.1202). While Knowles's 'hypothetical account' is unlikely to satisfy scholars in entrenched positions, it 'allows for the possibility that some of the revisions in F might be authorial but recognizes also that numerous other hands could have intervened and in all probability did' (2.1205). The differences between these texts do not strike me as authorial, and yet some of the questions raised by these alterations, such as, to give just one example, who should deliver the final speech of the play, can provoke fascinating discussions with students and in rehearsal rooms. We should recognize Shakespeare as a man of the theatre who would have considered changes and cuts to his plays as a necessary part of theatrical practice. Either way, in light of the publication of Knowles's edition, alongside alternative theories presented by scholars such as Brian Vickers⁵ and Duncan Salkeld,⁶ it seems that the revisionist position, as expounded in Gary Taylor and Michael Warren's collection of essays, *The Division of the Kingdoms*, can no longer be considered orthodoxy.⁷ Albany, as in Q1? Or Edgar, as in F1? The speaker of the final word is not certain.

⁵ Brian Vickers, *The One King Lear* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁶ Duncan Salkeld, 'Q/F: The Texts of *King Lear*', *The Library*, 22.1 (2021), 3-32.

⁷ *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Michael Warren (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

The remainder of Volume 2 will likely appeal to a wider readership. Knowles turns his attention towards Shakespeare's source play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, likely first performed in the late 1580s, and considers the 'theories that Sh. had known *Leir* since the beginning of his career, either from having seen it, or having acted in it' to be 'doubtful', concluding that 'In all likelihood Sh. used the printed ed. of 1605' (2.1272). But Knowles's claims regarding Shakespeare's familiarity (or lack thereof prior to 1605) with the older play strike me as untenable. Modern corpus linguistic methods reveal that Shakespeare uniquely recycled a statistically significant number of phrases from the play in works such as *Henry VI Part Three*, *Richard III*, *King John*, *Henry IV Part One*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Quantitative and qualitative evidence converges to support the earlier arguments of scholars such as Wilfrid Perrett,⁸ Meredith Skura,⁹ and Martin Mueller,¹⁰ based on more traditional literary-critical grounds, that *King Leir* exerted a considerable influence on Shakespeare's dramas long before the older play was available in print, and that he probably recalled *King Leir* through his phenomenal aural memory, required as an actor-dramatist.¹¹ Shakespeare need not have waited for the publication of the 1605 edition of *King Leir*; he seems to have imbibed its verbal details, themes, and elements of characterization, and I suspect he always intended to adapt the play. W. W. Greg asserted in 1940 that 'I do not think there can be any doubt that the prominence given to the author's name on the title-page' of the First Quarto edition was 'due to a desire to distinguish the piece as clearly as possible from its predecessor'.¹² Knowles acknowledges Greg's claim (2.1044), but does not elaborate beyond the notion that the 'advertisement of court performance before James' on Q1's title page 'was certainly designed to attract publishers' (2.1044).

Knowles considers the attribution of the source play to Thomas Kyd by Brian Vickers,¹³ but claims that 'Kyd is not known to have written for the Queen's Men, and *Leir* is a typically Queen's Men play' (2.1272). But again there are issues with Knowles's arguments here. Thomas Dekker, in his pamphlet, *A Knight's Conjuring* (1607), links several major poets and actors of the Elizabethan period:

⁸ Wilfrid Perrett, *The Story of King Lear from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare* (Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1904), pp. 95-121.

⁹ Meredith Skura, 'What Shakespeare Did with the Queen's Men's *King Leir* and When', *Shakespeare Survey*, 63 (2010), 316-25.

¹⁰ Martin Mueller, 'From *Leir* to *Lear*', *Philological Quarterly*, 73 (1994), 195-218.

¹¹ For further discussion, see Darren Freebury-Jones, 'Kyd and Shakespeare: Authorship versus Influence', *Authorship*, 6.1 (2017), 1-24. A fuller account of the influence of this play on Shakespeare can be found in Darren Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare's Tutor: The Influence of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

¹² W. W. Greg, 'The Date of *King Lear* and Shakespeare's Use of Earlier Versions of the Story', *The Library*, 20 (1940), 377-400 (p. 381).

¹³ Brian Vickers, 'Thomas Kyd, Secret Sharer', *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 April 2008, 13-15.

In another companie sat learned *Watson*, industrious *Kyd*, ingenious *Atchlow*, and (tho hee had bene a Player, molded out of their pennens) yet because he had bene their *Lover*, and a Register to the Muses, Inimitable *Bentley*: these were likewise carousing to one another at the holy well, some of them singing Pæans to *Apollo*, som of them *Hymnes* to the rest of the Goddes.¹⁴

T. W. Baldwin inferred from this passage that Kyd had written roles for the actor John Bentley, who was a member of the Queen's Men between 1583-5.¹⁵ Lukas Erne, in his authoritative study on Kyd, agrees that he 'appears to have been among the playwrights for the leading adult company'.¹⁶ It may be that none of Kyd's plays written for this company have survived: *King Leir* was performed in April 1594 at the Rose Theatre by the 'Quenes men & my lord of Susexe to geather',¹⁷ but I offer the tentative and no doubt controversial suggestion that Sussex's Men actually acquired that play from Pembroke's Men, for whom Shakespeare likely began his career as an actor-dramatist, and were therefore able to perform *King Leir* in conjunction with the Queen's Men, just as they were 'able to play "Titus & ondronicus"' when Pembroke's Men collapsed and the play 'became temporarily derelict'.¹⁸ Notably, David George has suggested that 'Sussex's Men were willing' to 'help Pembroke's all they could' in 1594, and 'probably Pembroke's Men were trying to raise capital for one more try at independent acting' by selling some of their plays.¹⁹ Whether Shakespeare had acted in *King Leir* or recalled it from performances he attended, there is now empirical evidence establishing that he knew it long before 1605, and I am therefore unpersuaded by Knowles's claim that 'Sh. used the 1605 edition, and that his completed play therefore postdates it' (2.1218).

Knowles provides a detailed survey of allusions to people and events in Shakespeare's tragedy, from topical references to King James (2.1218-21) to meteorological events and eclipses (2.1222-6), but finds many theories regarding the latter to be doubtful. He surveys stylistic evidence as a means of locating the play in Shakespeare's chronological development, such as vocabulary links with other plays (2.1230-2), colloquial usages (2.1232), and verse tests (2.1233-5), all of which would seem to

¹⁴ Thomas Dekker, *A Knight's Conjuring Done in Earnest: Discovered in Jest* (London, 1607; STC 6508), sigs K8^v-L1^r.

¹⁵ T. W. Baldwin, *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Plays* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1959), p. 178.

¹⁶ Lukas Erne, *Beyond 'The Spanish Tragedy': A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 1.

¹⁷ *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 21.

¹⁸ *Edward III: The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, ed. by Giorgio Melchiori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 7.

¹⁹ David George, 'Shakespeare and Pembroke's Men', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 32.3 (1981), 305-23 (p. 323).

situate the play in the early 1600s amidst *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Timon of Athens*. He then dives into Shakespeare's non-dramatic sources, such as Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*, and provides pertinent excerpts (2.1242-5), although he notes that 'Since no English edition or translation of Geoffrey existed during Sh.'s lifetime, there is much doubt' that it 'exerted any direct influence on him' (2.1245). He turns attention towards the likes of Raphael Holinshed, John Higgins, Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney, Samuel Harsnett, and Michel de Montaigne (via John Florio), again providing the pertinent excerpts and rendering the edition an invaluable resource for source studies of this play. It is particularly useful to have a full edition of the old *King Lear*, with overviews of Shakespeare's treatment of this source play (2.1328-45). Other versions and analogues of the Lear myth, including *Gesta Romanorum*, *Brut*, and a broadside ballad are detailed (2.1393-1402), and in his exploration of folk tales that Shakespeare might have recalled, Knowles offers the fascinating conclusion that as there is no 'explicit reference or clear allusion to the particular tales of Cinderella' and other 'folk-tales and motifs', it may be that they 'influenced' Shakespeare 'only indirectly', although they could be 'manifestations of mental archetypes, Jungian or not, found in many very different world cultures' (2.1407).

It is beyond the purview of this, or, I suspect, any review to encapsulate the vastity of Knowles's scholarship on this play, but needless to say the study of potential influences does not stop there. Knowles examines medieval drama, particularly features of morality plays, in relation to *King Lear* (2.1409-14), as well as Renaissance plays, noting that 'Many of the oddities, improbabilities, discontinuities, mixing of genres, the violence, absurdity, and moral simplicity' of Shakespeare's play are 'characteristic of other Jacobean plays' (2.1418). Connecting *King Lear* with Shakespeare's earlier plays, Knowles attends to scholarship on links with *Othello*, such as the respective gullings of Gloucester and Othello (2.1418-19); the scenes of madness and love triangles reminiscent of *Titus Andronicus* (2.1419); the 'humanity shared by king and peasant' (2.1419) explored in so many of Shakespeare's works; and the 'increasing helplessness of Constance in *King John*', a play that, incidentally, shares a number of verbal details with the old *King Lear* play,²⁰ her 'final frenzy of grief' for the 'loss of her son' anticipating 'Lear's career' (2.1420).

Knowles proceeds to the relationships between *King Lear* and earlier non-dramatic literature, encompassing classical figures such as Oedipus (2.1425) as well as the tragic works of Seneca (2.1426-7), and even, as a play that mingles tragic matter with comic materials, the comedies of Terence and Plautus (2.1427). As G. Wilson Knight put it in

²⁰ See Freebury-Jones, *Shakespeare's Tutor*.

1930: there is a ‘dualism continually crying in vain to be resolved either by tragedy or comedy’ in this play.²¹ Knowles reviews scholarship on the analogies between *King Lear* and the *Book of Job* (2.1428-9), the ‘archetype of the fallen king’ in Nebuchadnezzar (2.1429-30), as well as contemporaneous events that might have influenced Shakespeare’s play, most crucially King James’s ‘attempts to unify England and Scotland’ (2.1443). Of particular use to students of the play is Knowles’s investigation of the play’s critical reception history, from assessments made by Romantics (2.1449) such as Percy Bysshe Shelley to the precipitous discourse of mountains and colossuses I alluded to at the beginning of this review.

We then get a treatment of the play’s genre, identified as a history in Q1 but generally regarded as a tragedy. But what kind of tragedy? The range of critical perspectives is as dizzying as the ‘extreme verge’ Edgar imagines for Gloucester; it is in some respects a domestic tragedy, but in other respects it resembles classical Greek and Roman tragedy, whilst serving a political function for many commentators (2.1470-86). Moreover, Knowles notes that ‘interpretive criticism of the play frequently confronts issues of moral, religious, and philosophical significance’ (2.1486). Knowles provides an account of doubtful and often ‘obverse’ scholarship considering the play as ‘a reflection’ of Shakespeare’s ‘bitter personal experience or profound disillusion’ (2.1581) before reflecting on more pellucid scholarship regarding the play’s structure, in particular the play’s double plot (2.1587-1600). His account of criticism on Shakespeare’s stagecraft and dramaturgy includes ‘theatrical tableaux or speaking pictures’ (2.1601), ‘Nonverbal aural effects’ (2.1602), the ‘dramatic use of disguise’ (2.1604), ‘ceremonial or ritualistic actions’ (2.1605), and Shakespeare’s representation of madness (2.1608).

We are treated to a systematic account of Shakespeare’s language and style from the eighteenth century onwards, with many critics describing ‘the style as pushing at the limits of verbal expression and signification’ (2.1609), before launching into assessments of the play’s characters (2.1624-1774). There is a valuable account of the ‘fragmentary knowledge we have of 17th-c. performances’ of the play (2.1774), as well as a modern stage history beginning with Nahum Tate’s 1681 adaptation, and a survey of ‘significant modern productions and notable performances’ (2.1774). Knowles concedes that a ‘full stage history of performances from 1681 to the present’ would be ‘beyond the scope of this edition’ (2.1174), but there is very little beyond the scope of this behemoth edition and readers will find the section on *King Lear* in performance from 1681-2000 of great use. There are also fascinating accounts of other creative responses to the play, including films, music, and operatic versions (2.1861-75).

²¹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 161.

Writing what one feels, and not what one ought to say, it is impossible to avoid concluding that this is an aptly colossal edition of Shakespeare's tragedy in both the material sense (these hardback volumes run to over 3000 pages) and in terms of its content. Knowles's edition is one of the most impressive feats of scholarship students in Shakespeare studies are likely to have the privilege of reading. It will be of immense benefit to anybody studying *King Lear* and I suspect the edition will 'live beloved' on shelves 'forever'.