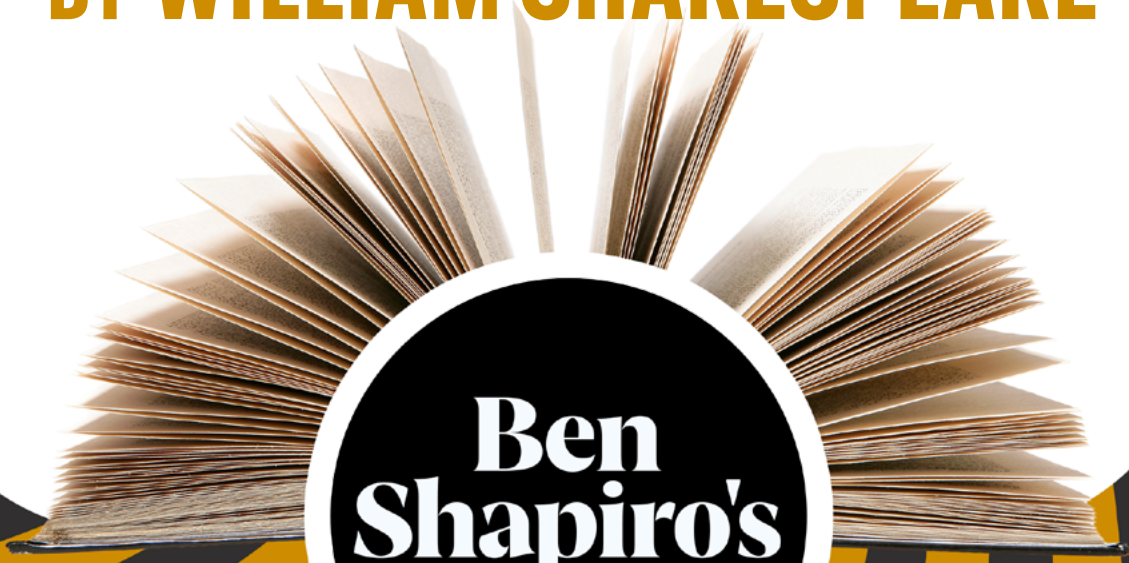


BEN'S NOTES

**KING
LEAR**

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



**Ben
Shapiro's**
Book Club

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

King Lear is widely considered Shakespeare's greatest masterpiece. It is also the most puzzling of Shakespeare's plays. There is no clear morality play at work here, as in *Macbeth* or *Othello*. There is no dramatic internal battle between morality and revenge, as in *Hamlet*. Instead, *King Lear* is all sound and fury: it is storms on the moors and madness; it is a loosely constructed monster of a plot, in which characters disappear and reappear in disguise, feign madness and fall into and out of it, and vacillate wildly between tragedy and comedy. It is the story of a man who makes a foolish request, and then is cast into the chaotic hell of madness; a charismatic villain who seems justified in his protest against the absurdity of a semi-caste system; a daughter unjustly murdered, and two other daughters who turn from irritated scions of a demanding king into vengeful monsters; and another father who has his eyes put out for the sin of believing a guilty son over an innocent one. *King Lear* has never been Shakespeare's most popular play (it is generally produced less often than nearly a dozen other Shakespeare plays, ranging from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to *Romeo and Juliet* to *The Tempest*), but it still reigns in the minds of Shakespeare's audiences as his most powerful work. As critic A.C. Bradley states: "*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me not his best play."¹

So why does *King Lear* haunt us in a way no other Shakespeare play does? Perhaps because it speaks to the tragedy of life in a way largely unprecedented except for in certain books of the Bible – Job and Ecclesiastes in particular – and rare works of Greek tragedy. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare dedicates the full measure of his art to the question of the meaning of life itself – and the result is one of the most enigmatic and powerful works of art ever created.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He married at age eighteen to Anne Hathaway, who was eight years his senior. They had a daughter named Susanna in 1583 and twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585; Hamnet died at the age of eleven in 1596.

The first reference to Shakespeare in the theater occurred in 1592 – hilariously enough, in a highly critical set of insults from another playwright, Robert Greene, in a pamphlet. By 1594, Shakespeare had joined the Lord Chamberlain's company of players, which performed at the Globe. During this time, Shakespeare apparently prospered, buying several properties. He died in 1616; his gravestone bears one of the most famous epitaphs in history:

*Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here.
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.²*

Shakespeare's life largely remains shrouded in mystery; that mystery has led some to speculate about whether he was responsible for his masterworks. The evidence that he was not seems extraordinarily scanty. Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-seven plays as well as a bevy of poems, including the timeless *Sonnets*. He is widely regarded as the greatest single author in the history of English literature, if not all of world literature.

NATURAL LAW VS. UNCARING NATURE

The word “nature” routinely arises throughout *King Lear*. As author and critic John Danby points out, the word “nature” appears more frequently in *King Lear* than in any of Shakespeare's other plays (over forty times in various formulations) – and it is used in two different senses.³ In the first sense, “nature” is used to mean traditional concepts of natural law – the belief that laws of morality are inherent in the world around us and can be divined through the use of reason. Natural law demands that we conform our behavior to the dictates of reason in consonance with nature. This is the way in which Gloucester initially uses the word “nature”:

*These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend
no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can
reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself*

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