

What Plighted Cunning Hides: Disease, Disguise, and Disclosure in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *King Lear* "leaves the history unspoke / That it intends to do" because Elizabethan dramatists did not write out their plays intending to have their "blest secrets" printed. Their texts were for performance, and assuming Shakespeare worked to some extent the way playwrights still work, he would have been revising *King Lear* right up to the play's first performance (and beyond, given the differences between the "Pied Bull" Quarto [1608] and the First Folio [1623.]) Furthermore, since Shakespeare did not participate in the printing process, *King Lear* is to some degree an interpretation of its first printer, who probably had not even seen the play performed. Previous research shows that the first printers of *King Lear* likely relied upon either semi-authorial sources, such as Shakespeare's foul papers, which no longer exist, or memorial reconstructions (recitations) given by one or two actors. Naturally, mistakes and confusions were inevitable, and in the absence of stage directions and editorial commentaries, which came much later, aspects of the dramatic action and other substantive elements—such as who is speaking which line and to whom—disappeared like "unpublished virtues" into the folds between what is spoken and unspoken. This paper will demonstrate how the earliest printings of *King Lear* inadvertently cast the play's primary dramatic action adrift on a sea of conjectural confusion. It will reveal the unspeakable source of Lear's madness, which accounts for his behavior from the very opening of the play and eventually kills him. It will expose the trinity of characters that go in disguise after the first scene and how they unite at the end of the play. Finally, it will disclose the surprising outcome of a tragic narrative hidden for nearly four centuries, thereby allowing for a seemingly new but in fact unrevised vision of *King Lear*.

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