

The One "King Lear." By BRIAN VICKERS. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Illus. Pp. xxiv + 388. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewed by RICHARD KNOWLES

At the beginning of Ronald Harwood's play *The Dresser* (1980; film 1983) the central character, based on the great actor-manager Donald Wolfit, sits alone on the stage, evidently during one of his many wartime tours, and asks wearily what play he is doing that night. When told it is *King Lear*, he responds with a single word: "Impossible!" A reviewer may be forgiven for having the same reaction to the thought of reviewing Vickers's big and important new book *The One "King Lear"*; beyond its being a dauntingly impressive book in itself, its very title contains multitudes: it names a play now widely thought to be the greatest artistic achievement of our greatest English playwright, and a play that now by almost any measure stands alone not only for its dramatic force but also for the amount of critical attention it has drawn in recent years. *Lear* since World War II has come to speak most directly to the concerns of our times. Because it shows the possibility of universal loss, it has been a play easier for audiences to hold in awe than in comfortable affection, but no one today would deny its special dramatic and poetic power and unique greatness.

The intriguing word "One" in Vickers's title refers not only to the play's singularly eminent stature but also more particularly to its oneness, to its formal and stylistic unity. His book had its beginning as a firm reply to critical opinion about the play that has become so widespread in the past quarter of a century that Vickers can call it the "new orthodoxy" (x). In his opinion this new view is quite unjustified by evidence and destroys appreciation of the true greatness of the play; he spends his book refuting it. There are two early printed editions known as *King Lear*—the inexpensive one printed by Nicholas Okes in 1608, known as the First Quarto (Q), and the version published as part of the First Folio of 1623 (F). These two versions, issued at different times from different printing houses, were typeset from different manuscripts. Not surprisingly, there are many textual differences between the Q and F versions of *Lear*. For four centuries these differences were resolved by editors who conflated from each original version those lines that seemed to complement each other and to form a complete and coherent whole. The result was the traditional edition of *Lear*.

That picture changed in the last quarter of the twentieth century when a small group of "revolutionary" editors (xv) promoted the idea that the Q and F versions of *Lear* were two separate plays—Shakespeare's original as it had first appeared in Q, and his later revision as it subsequently appeared in F. They persuaded two publishers, Oxford and Norton, to support this theoretical idea by including both of the two somewhat different original Q and F versions of *Lear*, sometimes printing them along with a third, the older traditional combined version of the play. There are now three or four versions of the same play, one based primarily on the Q text, a second based on the F text, a third which combines Q and F in the traditional way, and perhaps a fourth, a continuing site of contention among these. Against this

multiplication of entities, Vickers has undertaken to wield Occam's razor, arguing for the superiority of the original Quarto of 1608. His basic argument is that there is simply no evidence that Shakespeare was ever inclined to rewrite *King Lear*, and therefore whatever variants accidental or intended in Q or F are the responsibility of someone else. Accordingly, he considers each text in turn and then evaluates the arguments applied in each case.

As for Q, it is now generally acknowledged to be one of the most execrable specimens of a printed play ever produced at that time. In *The Texts of "King Lear" and Their Origins*, Peter Blayney reveals one reason why Q was printed so incompetently: it was the first play that Nicholas Okes had ever printed. In 1608 he was completely unfamiliar with the conventions of dramatic manuscripts and texts, such as intermingling of prose and verse, alternation of dialogue with stage directions, and sharing of lines among several speakers. His inexperience resulted in numerous typos and other errors. He was also working from a messy playhouse manuscript rather than from a clean scribal copy. But Vickers's most original insight into Okes's difficulties with setting the text accurately was that, owing to his unfamiliarity with setting play texts, Okes simply misjudged the amount of paper he would need: "It dawned on me that all the visible peculiarities of the Quarto—its crowded pages, with verse set as prose; its verse lineation (largely correct in the Folio) being adjusted so as to take up less room; and the use of common space-saving devices such as turning lines over, abbreviating words, using ampersands, and omitting spaces after commas—could all be explained by a very simple theory: that Okes had miscalculated the amount of paper that would be needed to print such a long play. In this book I work out the consequences of that insight" (xvii). To save space, Okes also set many passages of verse as prose and ran verse lines together, resulting in overcrowded and confusingly printed pages. He worked repeatedly to shorten expansive and descriptive passages, omitting words and lines that were not essential to a scene. By cutting words and adjusting text, he was able to shorten the text by more than four hundred lines, saving one and a half sheets (several pages) of expensive paper.

In F, changes were made deliberately in order to change the quality of the texts. The F revisers modernized the playhouse manuscript by changing its spelling and grammar; as a result they sometimes changed Shakespeare's wording and word order. They also regularized the verse, changing about 125 lines to more regular iambic pentameter, often spoiling its original emphases and poetic effects. In addition, they standardized many stage directions, making them tamer and less vivid than in Q. They cut many passages with unusual crudeness, simply by lopping off lines at their ends, not by carefully selecting and rejoining individual lines; thus, they lost cue lines at the beginning or end of passages without fully preserving continuity—to the detriment of pacing, emphasis, and narrative and thematic coherence. The F editors' cuts have been justified by revisionist critics as being obviously, identifiably Shakespeare's (though anyone can make a cut), and the proposed reasons for his making them—that eventually some Q passages seemed to be disposable, or to slow down a speech or scene, or not to be "theatrical" enough, or not sufficiently to reflect in Q a particular character's importance or role or

personality—have seemed to many to be only unpersuasive, convenient inventions produced by the revisionists to support their theory. To other scholars and critics, cutting a whole scene (4.3) and severely reducing the fantastic mad trial scene (3.6) have seemed like extraordinarily bad rhearrical judgments from a misguided desire to speed up the action. A repeated criticism of the revisionists' explanations of F's changes is that they seemed to be post-facto rationalizations rather than believable reasons for making some of F's indefensible changes to Q's narrative structure and characterization.

In Vickers's judgment, "It is inconceivable that he [Shakespeare] would . . . have damaged his own design by making the crude cuts found in the Folio: it would have been an act of self-mutilation" (xiii). Vickers defends this conclusion by celebrating the play's countless moments of genius in one scene, character, and passage after another, from beginning to end. Ultimately, his profound understanding of Shakespeare's play, as well as the vicissitudes of printing, allows him and us to appreciate fully how remarkably its innumerable and incomparable excellences have survived despite the several varieties of difficulty and misfortune in the publication of its two indispensable early printed editions—the inexperience of its first printer, the several intrusive sophistications introduced by his successor. As Vickers's book triumphantly reveals, these later developments only serve to demonstrate and confirm the original and indestructible greatness of every aspect of Shakespeare's masterwork. Vickers's fine book only confirms the fact that Shakespeare never had any reason to become disaffected with his greatest play, nor to feel the slightest impulse to attempt to change it. *King Lear* remains, as it has been from the beginning, sui generis.