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# KING LEAR IN OUR TIME

MAYNARD MACK

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*For F. B. M.*

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the fierce dispute

Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay;

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MAYNARD MACK

*London*  
20 April 1965

## *Contents*

ONE	I
<i>Actors and Redactors</i>	
TWO	43
<i>Archetype, Parable, and Vision</i>	
THREE	81
<i>Action and World</i>	
INDEX	119

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Actors and Redactors*

That Shakespear is a bore and even an absurdity to people who cannot listen to blank verse and enjoy it as musicians listen to an opera (Shakespear's methods are extremely like Verdi's); that Mr. George Robey, heroically trying to find jokes crude enough for an audience of rustic Tommies, would shrink from Touchstone's story about the beef and the mustard; that we who think it funny to call a man's head his nut remain joyless when Shakespear calls it his costard (not knowing that costard is an apple); that Benedick cannot amuse or fascinate the young ladies who have adored Robert Loraine and Granville-Barker as Jack Tanner; that William's puns are as dead as Tom Hood's or Farnie's; that Elizabethan English is a half-dead language and Euphuist English unintelligible and intolerable: all these undeniable facts are reasons for not performing Shakespear's plays at all, but not reasons for breaking them up and trying to jerry-build modern plays with them, as the Romans broke up the Coliseum to build hovels. . . . The simple thing to do with a Shakespear play is to perform it. The alternative is to let it alone. If Shakespear made a mess of it, it is not likely that Smith or Robinson will succeed where he failed.

BERNARD SHAW