

A rare early quarto of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*. London: Nathaniel Butter, [1619]. 7 1/4 inches x 5 1/4 inches (184 mm x 133 mm), [88] pages, A–L4.

M. VWilliam Shake-speare: | *his* | True Chronicle History of the life | and death of King *Lear* and his | *three Daughters*. | *With the vnfortunate life of Edgar*, | sonne and heire to the Earle of *Glocester*, and | *his sullen and assumed humor of Tom* | of Bedlam. | *As it was plaid before the Kings Maiesty at White-Hall vp-* | *pon S. Stephens night, in Christmas Hollidaies*. | By his Maiesties Seruants, playing vsually at the | *Globe on the Banck-side*. | [Heb Ddieu device] | Printed for *Nathaniel Butter*. | 1608.

Shakespeare's quartos, so named because of their format (a single sheet folded twice, creating four leaves or eight pages), are the first printed representations of his plays and, as none of the plays survives in manuscript, of great importance to Shakespeare scholarship. Only twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto before the closure of the theaters and outbreak of civil war in 1642. These quartos were printed from either Shakespeare's "foul papers" (a draft with notations and changes that was given in sections to actors for their respective roles); from "fair copies" created from foul papers that presented the entire action of the play; from promptbooks, essentially fair copies annotated and expanded by the author and acting company to clarify stage directions, sound effects, etc.; or from a previously published quarto edition. The quartos were inexpensive to produce and were published for various reasons, including to secure the acting company's rights to the material and to bring in money during the

plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

At the opening of *King Lear*, the title character, ruler of England, announces he will divide his kingdom among his three daughters according to their love for him. Goneril and Regan make elaborate declarations of love for him, while Cordelia says simply that she loves him as a daughter ought. Despite the protests of his closest advisor, the Earl of Kent, Lear disowns Cordelia and splits his domain between Regan and Goneril. He then banishes Kent and goes to live with Goneril. The king of France marries Cordelia despite her lack of dowry and title. Lear soon quarrels with Goneril over his entourage, which includes the banished yet loyal Kent in disguise, and leaves to live with Regan. Lear and Regan also argue, and she reduces the number of his retainers. Goneril arrives and the sisters dismiss Lear's courtiers altogether. Lear, driven to madness by their ill-treatment, wanders about in a tempest and is led to shelter by the Earl of Gloucester, who is blinded by Regan and her husband because of his "treachery." Gloucester's faithful son Edgar prevents his suicide, while his illegitimate son Edmund becomes Goneril's lover. Cordelia leads an army to rescue Lear from her sisters and is reconciled with him; Lear regains his sanity. Cordelia's forces are defeated by those of her sisters, and she and Lear are imprisoned. Regan has also become Edmund's lover, so she and Goneril fight and kill each other. Edgar mortally wounds Edmund, who has ordered Cordelia to be hanged. Lear dies of his grief.

This second quarto of *King Lear* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards.

"SHAKESPEARE. THE HISTORY OF KING LEAR. 1608." is lettered in

gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III. The 1608 date on the title page and spine is erroneous; this quarto was printed by William Jaggard in 1619 from the 1608 first quarto.

This quarto was previously owned by George III (1738–1820), who reigned as king of Great Britain and Ireland from 1760 until his death. At the start of George III's reign, there was no royal library to speak of; his grandfather, George II, had presented his library to the British Museum in 1757. In 1763, George III began his collection in earnest with the acquisition of the library of Joseph Smith, the former British consul in Venice whose collection contained many early printed books and classics. The king's agents attended many English and Continental auctions, and they purchased both single volumes and complete libraries on his behalf, steadily enlarging the royal collection. In 1774 Frederick Augusta Barnard was appointed Royal Librarian, a post he held for the remainder of George III's reign. Barnard, with the advice of such men of letters as Samuel Johnson, enlarged the king's library in a methodical fashion, assembling a fine collections of religious texts, English and European history, classics, English and Italian literature, and such incunables as a Gutenberg Bible and a first edition of Caxton's *Canterbury Tales*. By 1820, the library included 65,000 printed books and nearly 20,000 pamphlets; George IV, who succeeded his father on the throne, donated the library to the British Museum in 1823.

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