

## **An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear***

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*. London: Nathaniel Butter, 1608. 6 15/16 inches x 4 3/4 inches (176 mm x 121 mm), [84] pages, [A]2 B–L4 (first leaf blank).

M. William Shak-speare: | *his* | True Chronicle Historie 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 Gloster, and his | sullen and assumed humor of | **Tom** of Bedlam: | *As it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall vpon* | *S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes.* | By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe | on the Bancke-side. | [Okes' device] | *London,* | Printed for *Nathaniel Butter,* and are to be sold at his shop in *Pauls* | Church-yard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere | **St. Austins** Gate. 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 first quarto of *King Lear* was bound in nineteenth-century dark red morocco, with blind- and gold-tooled covers and turn-ins. “WILLIAM SHAK-SPEAR. HIS TRUE CHRONICLE HISTORIE OF THE LIFE OF KING LEAR” in gold up the spine. The leaves’ edges are gilt. A binder’s ticket (“Bound by | RILEY | 54 Brunswick Street, | Black Friars Road”) is pasted on the verso of the front flyleaf along with a clipping from a dealer’s catalogue.

This quarto, before its acquisition by the British Museum in 1858, was owned by James Orchard Halliwell-Phillipps (1820–1889), the English Shakespeare collector and scholar whose *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare* (1848) was published in several editions. Beginning in the 1870s, he devoted his time completely to the research of Shakespeare’s life. Halliwell-Phillipps was instrumental in the acquisition of New Place, the site of Shakespeare’s last home, and in the creation of the Museum at Stratford-upon-Avon (now Nash’s House and New Place).

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