

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. London: Thomas Pavier, [1619]. 7 1/8 inches x 5 1/4 inches (181 mm x 133 mm), [64] pages, A–H4.

[ornament] | A | Midsommer nights | dreame. | As it hath beene sundry times pub- | *likely acted, by the Right Honoura-* | ble, the Lord Chamberlaine his | *seruants.* | *VWritten by VWilliam Shakespeare.* | [device] | *Printed by Iames Roberts, 1600.*

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.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is set in Athens on the eve of the marriage between Theseus, duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Theseus has declared that Hermia must marry Demetrius, the choice of her father Egeus, despite Hermia's love of Lysander. Hermia and Lysander defy the edict and run off into the forest together. Demetrius and Hermia's friend Helena, who loves Demetrius, follow the fleeing lovers. Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, are in the midst of a marital dispute, and Oberon, seeking to punish her, sprinkles a love potion in Titania's eyes while she sleeps that will cause her to fall in love with the first person she sees upon waking. When Oberon hears of Helena's unrequited love for Demetrius, he instructs his servant Puck to give Demetrius the love potion and be sure Helena is the first person he sees; Puck accidentally gives it to Lysander, who falls for Helena. Afterward, the mischievous Puck puts a spell on Bottom, who is rehearsing a play for the wedding celebration of Theseus, that gives him the head of a donkey. Titania is awakened by Bottom's singing and seeing him, falls in love. Oberon learns of Puck's mistake and orders him use the potion to make Demetrius love Helena. In her distraction, Titania relinquishes control of her page to Oberon, eliminating the source of their quarrel. Oberon puts the four lovers to sleep and administers the antidote to Lysander. He then gives Titania the antidote and they reconcile. Theseus and Hippolyta come upon the sleeping lovers who awake from what they think an odd dream, their allegiances now sorted out. They all return to Athens for the wedding festivities.

This second quarto of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKESPEARE. A MIDSOMMER

NIGHTS DREAME. 1600.” is lettered in gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III. “Edward Nedham” is written on the title page, and “H. Cleaveland,” effaced and nearly illegible appears on A2r.

Now at the British Library, this quarto was formerly 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 collection 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.

Octavo code: **shamif**