

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*

William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*. London: Andrew Wise, 1600. 7 1/4 inches x 5 inches (184 mm x 127 mm), [72] pages, A–I4.

[ornament] | Much adoe about | Nothing. | *As it hath been sundrie times publikely* | acted by the right honourable, the Lord | Chamberlaine his seruants. | *Written by William Shakespeare.* | [ornament] | London | Printed by V. S. for Andrew Wise, and | William Aspley. | 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.

Much Ado About Nothing is a comedic story of two sets of lovers, mingled

together throughout the action of the play. Benedick and Beatrice, both happy in their single lives are reluctant to be involved with the other and vow never to marry; they are slowly tricked into believing they are the object of the other's desire and thus fall in love. The romance of Claudio and Hero is jeopardized by Claudio being convinced by a jealous companion that his lover Hero has been unchaste. Claudio and Hero are eventually brought together by the Friar's plan to unmask the slanderer by claiming that Hero died after hearing that Claudio thought she was a whore. The plot is revealed and both pairs happily prepare to be married.

This first quarto of *Much Ado About Nothing* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKESPEARE. MUCH ADOE ABOUT NOTHING. LOND. 1600." is lettered in gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III.

Now in 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 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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