

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*

William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*. London: Edward White, 1611. 6 7/8 inches x 4 7/8 inches (175 mm x 124 mm), [80] pages, A–G4 H4 (-H1) I–K4.

[ornament] | The | most lamen- | table tragedie | of *Titus Andronicus*. | *As it hath sundry | times beene plaide by the Kings | Maiesties Seruants*. | [device] | London, | Printed for Eedward White, and are to be solde | at his shoppe, nere the little North dore of | Pauls, at the signe of the | Gun. 1611.

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.

In this play, the Roman general Titus Andronicus returns from ten years at

war, bringing with him Tamora, Queen of the Goths, and her sons. Only four of his twenty-five sons have survived, and Titus therefore sacrifices Tamora's eldest son; Tamora vows revenge. She becomes the wife of Saturninus and Rome's empress. Tamora frames Titus' sons for a murder and they are beheaded; her sons also rape Titus' daughter Lavinia and sever her hands and her tongue. Titus's last living son, Lucius, is banished, and he allies with the enemy Goths and plans to attack Rome. Titus feigns madness and Tamora presses him to stop Lucius. Titus instead kills her sons, bakes them in a pie, and feeds them to Tamora; he then kills Tamora and Lavinia. Saturninus kills Titus, and Lucius kills Saturninus, becoming the Roman emperor.

This third quarto of *Titus Andronicus* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKSPERE. THE TRAGEDIE OF TITUS ANDRONICUS. LOND. 1611." is lettered in gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III.

Now at the British Library, this quarto was formerly owned by James West (1704–1772) — member of Parliament, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and President of the Royal Society (1768–1772) — known for his collections of books, manuscripts, and coins. His library, which was sold 29 March 1773, was particularly rich in early English books and included a reputed thirty-six Caxtons, some of which were magnificent copies from the Harleian Collection. The choicest books from West's collection, this quarto among them, were acquired 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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