

George III's quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Richard II*

William Shakespeare, *Richard II*. London: printed by John Norton, 1634. 6 3/4 inches x 4 3/4 inches (171 mm x 121 mm), [80] pages, B–K4 (lacks quire A, supplied in MS.).

The | life and | death of King | *Richard* the | second. | With new Additions of
the | *Parliament Scene*, and the | Deposing of King *Richard*. | As it hath
beene acted by the Kings Majesties | Servants, at the *Globe*. | By *William*
Shakespeare. | [ornament] | *London*, | Printed by **Iohn Norton**. | 1634.

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.

Richard II, was the first of four plays written by Shakespeare documenting Richard's reign and that of his successors, Henry IV and Henry V. It opens with Richard II deciding which of two courtiers, Mowbray and Bolingbroke, is guilty of the murder of Richard's uncle the Duke of Gloucester. Because Richard ordered Mowbray to kill the Duke, he decides to banish Bolingbroke for six years and Mowbray forever, the first step in Richard's downfall. John of Gaunt, Bolingbroke's father, dies and Richard seizes his inheritance; the nobles are angered by this, and they plot to bring Bolingbroke back. While Richard is fighting a war in Ireland, Bolingbroke builds an army, attacks the north coast of England, and when Richard returns, reclaims his land and then seizes the throne. He crowns himself Henry IV and Richard is imprisoned at the castle of Pomfret. An over-ambitious nobleman interprets one of Henry's remarks as a hint that he should kill Richard, which he does. Henry refuses to acknowledge his role in Richard's death, but vows to go to Jerusalem to atone for his part in the murder.

This sixth quarto of *Richard II* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKESPEARE. THE LIFE AND DEATH OF K. RICHARD THE SECOND. LOND.1634." is lettered in gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III.

Now at the British Library, this quarto was formerly in the library of 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.

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