

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. London: Nicholas Ling and John Trundell, 1603. 6 15/16 inches x 4 11/16 inches (176 mm x 119 mm), [66] pages. [A]2 B–I4 (title page lacking).

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. This first quarto edition of *Hamlet* is considered a "bad" quarto; it is believed to be a reconstruction of the play by actors from memory and is considerably shorter than subsequent printings of the play. Despite its flaws, it is still of great interest to historians of Shakespeare's oeuvre and to specialists in theatrical history.

One of Shakespeare's most esteemed plays, *Hamlet* is the story of the troubled prince of Denmark and the events that unfold when he becomes aware that his father was killed by his uncle, now his stepfather. It is a tragedy of regicide and revenge with all the trimmings: a usurper on the throne, a haunting, madness, suicide, and mayhem resulting in multiple deaths — both accidental and homicidal, not to mention a foreign invasion. Hamlet's famous soliloquy in Act III of the play as we know it (the quartos are not divided into acts) is, beyond a doubt, one of the most powerful speeches in all of Shakespeare's plays.

Now in the British Library, this quarto was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century red sheep with gilt tooling. The spine is divided into three compartments, the second of which contains "SHAKESPEARE. HAMLET. 1603." lettered upward in gold. Gold-tooled turn-ins with "1623" at the top of the back board.

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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