

### **A rare quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Hamlet***

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. London: John Smethwicke, 1637. 7 1/16 inches x 5 3/16 inches (179 mm x 132 mm), [104] pages, A–N4 (leaf E1 missigned D).

THE | TRAGEDY | OF HAMLET | PRINCE OF | DENMARK. | Newly imprinted and enlarged,  
according to the true | and perfect Copy last Printed. | By WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. |  
[Smethwicke's device] | LONDON, | Printed by *R. Young* for *Iohn Smethwicke*, and are to be sold  
at his | shop in Saint *Dunstons* Church-yard in Fleet-stteet, | under the Diall. 1637.

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. Although the title page of this *Hamlet* quarto is undated, it is widely considered to have been printed in 1622.

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 at the National Library of Scotland, this 1637 fifth quarto of *Hamlet* is inlaid and bound in a nineteenth-century binding of dark green straight-grained morocco, spine and tips edged with gold rules, dark tan boards. Lettered in gold: "HAMLET" in the second compartment; "5<sup>TH</sup> | EDIT." in the third; and "WM. | SHAKESPEARE" in the fourth. The bookplate of John Patrick Crichton Stuart, the third Marquis of Bute is on the front pastedown; the bookplate for the Bute Collection of English Plays is on the back pastedown.

This fifth quarto of *Hamlet* was purchased by the National Library of Scotland from Major Michael Crichton Stuart on 3 April, 1956. It is part of the Bute Collection of early English plays that was initially formed by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762). It was expanded by her son-in-law John Stuart, third Earl of Bute, and further enlarged by her grandson the first Marquis of Bute, also named John Stuart (1744–1814), who notably acquired 39 Shakespeare quartos. This quarto was likely acquired by the first Marquis from the 1806 sale of English book collector Richard Forster. The National Library of Scotland collection contains 1,266 English plays and includes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century adaptations of Shakespeare's plays and examples of the foremost dramatists from Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, and Restoration periods; also included are a number of promptbooks.

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