

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*

William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. London: Thomas Fisher, 1600. 6 5/16 inches x 4 1/4 inches (160 mm x 108 mm), [64] pages, A–H4.

A | Midsommer nights | dreame. | As it hath beene sundry times pub- | *lickley*
acted, by the Right honoura- | ble, the Lord Chamberlaine his | *seruants.* |
Written by William Shakespeare. | [printer's device] | Imprinted at London,
for *Thomas Fisher*, and are to | be sould at his shoppe, at the Signe of the
White Hart, | in *Fleetestreete*. 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.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is set in Athens on the eve of the marriage between Theseus, duke of Athens, and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Theseus has declared that Hermia must marry Demetrius, the choice of her father Egeus, despite Hermia's love of Lysander. Hermia and Lysander defy the edict and run off into the forest together. Demetrius and Hermia's friend Helena, who loves Demetrius, follow the fleeing lovers. Oberon and Titania, king and queen of the fairies, are in the midst of a marital dispute, and Oberon, seeking to punish her, sprinkles a love potion in Titania's eyes while she sleeps that will cause her to fall in love with the first person she sees upon waking. When Oberon hears of Helena's unrequited love for Demetrius, he instructs his servant Puck to give Demetrius the love potion and be sure Helena is the first person he sees; Puck accidentally gives it to Lysander, who falls for Helena. Afterward, the mischievous Puck puts a spell on Bottom, who is rehearsing a play for the wedding celebration of Theseus, that gives him the head of a donkey. Titania is awakened by Bottom's singing and seeing him, falls in love. Oberon learns of Puck's mistake and orders him use the potion to make Demetrius love Helena. In her distraction, Titania relinquishes control of her page to Oberon, eliminating the source of their quarrel. Oberon puts the four lovers to sleep and administers the antidote to Lysander. He then gives Titania the antidote and they reconcile. Theseus and Hippolyta come upon the sleeping lovers who awake from what they think an odd dream, their allegiances now sorted out. They all return to Athens for the wedding festivities.

This first quarto of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century sienna sheep with blind and gilt

tooling, which includes the crest of David Garrick on both boards.

“SHAKESPEARE. MIDSOMMER NIGHTS DREAM. LOND. 1600.” is lettered in gold up the spine. The turn-ins are gold tooled and the top turn-in of the front board is signed “TUCKETT. BINDER. BRITISH MUSEUM.” The leaves’ edges are gilt.

Now at the British Library, this quarto was previously owned by David Garrick (1717–1779), an English actor whose unaffected performance in the title role of *Richard III* in 1741 brought him renown. Garrick, both as an actor and theatrical manager, exerted a tremendous influence on stage practices throughout the 18th century; as a friend and classics pupil of Samuel Johnson, he brought reputability to his trade. He began to collect early printed plays during the 1740s, at which time most collectors regarded stage scripts as popular works unfit for inclusion in serious libraries. Garrick, however, recognized their worth and, assisted by friends and knowledgeable advisors, built his collection in the interest of scholarship and the enrichment of subsequent generations. He bequeathed the collection to the British Museum upon his death in 1779.

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