

## The Mysterious Mr John Ward

### The Birmingham based, grand-daddy of eighteenth century Shakespeare

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*John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons, in "Macbeth", painted by Thomas Beach in 1786, from the Garrick Club Collections.*

Sarah Siddons is the most written about actress of the eighteenth century. Her talent and influence on acting is legendary and she is referred to regularly as one of the 'great Shakespeareans'.

Likewise, John Philip Kemble, had a career as an actor and theatre manager, including the most successful years at Covent Garden, that had a major impact on 18th century performance of Shakespeare.

No Shakespeare collection would be complete without a considerable collection of material on these actors, and the Shakespeare Collection at the Library of Birmingham are blessed with a wonderful array of material on both, including Sarah's acting copy of *Othello*, which she used for public readings later in her career. The significance and value of this object from theatre history is reflected in the fact that it is held in an air-tight safe along with copies of Shakespeare's Folios.

Amazingly, these two hugely influential actors of Georgian theatre were brother and sister, and both had biographies written by James Boaden in the mid-1820s. In those biographies there is only a very brief mention of their grandfather, a man called John Ward.

Victorian theatre biographer, Percy Fitzgerald, also only makes brief reference to Ward when writing about how Roger Kemble, a former hairdresser, joined John Ward's company as an actor and married Ward's daughter Sarah, becoming the parents of a mighty theatrical dynasty. In his work, *The Kembles. An Account of the Kemble Family* he wrote:

In 1752 [Roger Kemble] joined at Birmingham a company of strolling players, under the leadership of John Ward. In 1753 he married Ward's handsome daughter Sarah, and in due time, succeeded to Ward's business.

In his *Annals of the English Stage*, John Doran reported how Ward reacted to Roger Kemble's marriage to his daughter:



Portrait of John Ward [attributed to Thomas Beach], 1833, from The Garrick Club Collections

When Roger carried off Miss Ward, her father with difficulty forgave her, — and only on the ground that she had, at all events, obeyed his injunction, — not to marry an actor. "He will never be that," said the old player of the Betterton era. With which remark, his discontent was exhausted.

Sometimes it is what's missing from an archive that causes curiosity. John Ward, is curious by his relative absence from the archives held in the Shakespeare Collection. Why is this strange?; because Ward established the first permanent theatre in Birmingham in which Shakespeare was regularly performed, and was one of the first 'Bardolaters' to bring respectability to the travelling player.

Ward founded the *Warwickshire Company of Comedians*, a company of players that toured the West Midlands and Welsh borders. In 1740 he established the Moor Street Theatre; again, there is little mention of the Moor Street Theatre in the collection. It thrived as the only major theatre in Birmingham for ten years before the King Street Theatre was built in 1752.

Archival evidence about John Ward comes from various sources: one or two letters held in the Folger Shakespeare Library; his edits to two *Hamlet* prompt books held in John Hopkins University; short pieces written in the biographies of his more famous descendants; and, notices and reviews of his productions from local newspapers.

One item in the Shakespeare Collection relating to Ward is a record of him travelling to Stratford-upon-Avon in September, 1746 to deliver a performance of *Othello* to raise funds for the repair of Shakespeare's memorial bust in Holy Trinity Church. He also read out a prologue by the Rev. Greene with whom he appeared to maintain contact.

In Cecil Price's book on *The English Theatre in Wales*, he cites a rather disgruntled Stratfordian's response to the work funded by Ward:

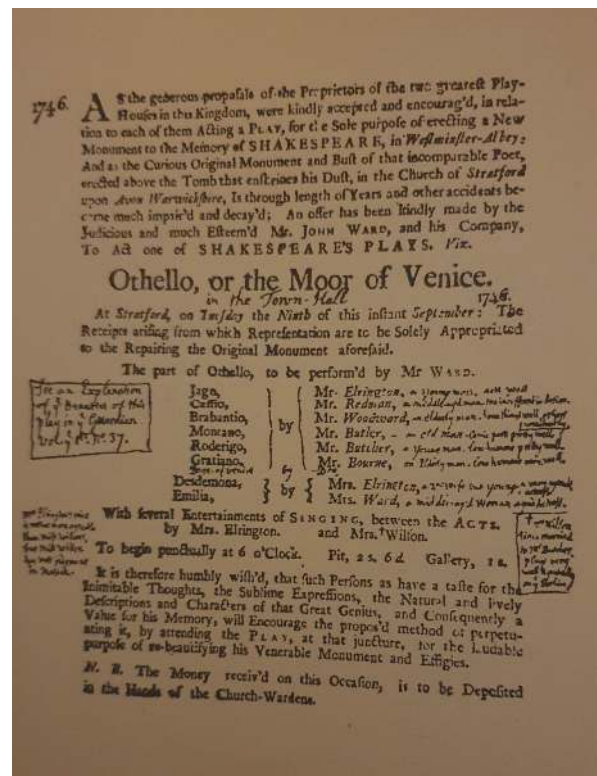
'... they offended me greatly by disfiguring by paint the monument in Stratford Church of the immortal Shakespeare - but the Million thought differently.'

Ward's performance raised £17 (a lot of money in those days) which ensured the work could be carried out on the bust of Shakespeare which still stands in Holy Trinity Church. Ward's performance is also the first recorded performance of *Othello*, or any other Shakespeare play, performed in Stratford-upon-Avon.

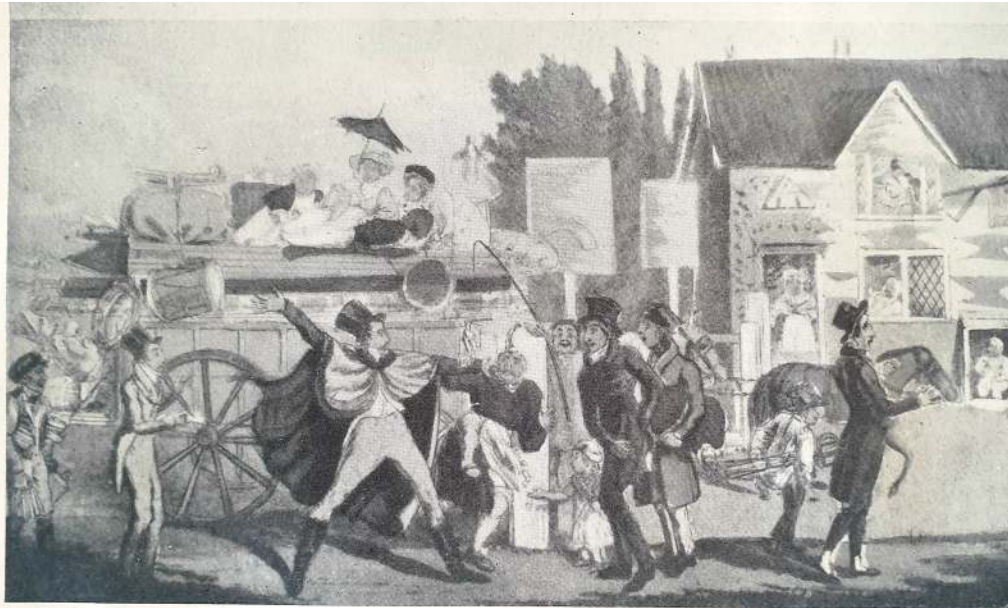
Interestingly, there is a record of Rev. Greene's 45 line prologue being performed by Ward at a later date:

On Easter Monday, in Brecon, 1758, at the Great Room of 'The Bell', Ward's company performed *Macbeth*, with a 'Prologue on Shakespeare' by the Rev. Mr Greene, Master of the Stratford Free School. (*Glocester Journal*, 4.3.1760; 1.4.1760).

It's more than likely that this was the same piece written for the memorial fund in Stratford twelve years earlier.



Greene's annotated copy of the playbill for Ward's company performance. Held in the Folger Shakespeare Library, donated by Halliwell-Phillips. Image from article by McManaway, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 1949.



STROLLING PLAYERS REACH A TURNPIKE.  
An Early Nineteenth-Century Scene.

(From the etching by Theodore Lane in Pierce Egan's "Life of an Actor" [1825].)

[Frontispiece]

Reprinted in Cecil Price's *The English Theatre in Wales*, 1948

Itinerant strolling player companies, like Ward's company, usually comprised of family units, with parents, and children forming the main part of the company. From this period there are many theatrical families, and acting dynasties formed, in the tradition of the strolling player. The talents of those families varied but it was a way of keeping a family together whilst making a living.

Travelling players were not always welcome and could be arrested on the charge of vagrancy. Local magistrates would occasionally lock up whole families of strolling players on no other grounds than making a living through theatre. They were also considered undesirable on moral grounds. Price quotes a magistrate, Richard Hill, who commented on:

... the pernicious consequences which too often result from permitting such gentry among them, how many diseases left uncured, how many pockets emptied, how many minds corrupted, how many apprentices and servant-maids commence *Othellos*, *Desdemonas*, *Altamonts*, *Calistas*, *Lady Wrongheads*... and what not, to their high improvement in the arts of debauchery, intrigue, dissimulation and romantic love, the great loss of their time and neglect of their masters' business.

It's interesting that in generalising Hall picks out *Othello* from the Shakespeare canon, a clear indication of the play's popularity at the time.

Playbills and reviews of performances around the country demonstrate the wide reach of these companies through the provinces as they brought the London repertoire to rural populations as public entertainments. However, the legal status of acting companies performing Shakespeare was questionable. At the time, only theatres which had been given a royal Patent were allowed to perform serious spoken drama, hence the fact that non-patent theatres had to intersperse their evenings with pantomimes, comedy, music, dancing, or melodramas; if they wanted to perform Shakespeare it had to either be billed on a similar 'entertainment' footing, be performed as an adaptation, or free of charge. This monopoly on drama by the Theatres Royal wasn't revoked until the 1843 Theatres Act. One imagines this is why Ward entitled his company, which predominantly performed Shakespeare, the Warwickshire Company of Comedians; to avoid defining themselves as performers of 'serious drama'.

This early notice of a production at Moor Street is for a popular adaptation of *The Tempest* and was discovered by Cunningham in the *Aris's Gazette* dating from 20 August 1744:

'By a Company of Comedians from London,  
At the New Theatre in Moor Street,  
The present Evening being the 29th. of this instant,  
will be revived  
THE TEMPEST  
Or the  
ENCHANTED ISLAND  
As altered by Mr Dryden and Sir William Davenant.

Concluding with a Grand Masque of  
NEPTUNE AND AMPHYTRITE  
No person can be admitted behind the Scenes, on Account of the Machinery.  
Boxes and Stage, 2/6, Pit 2/-,  
Balconies, 2/-, 1st Gallery, 1/-, 2nd, 6d.  
To begin punctually at 7 o'clock.  
Vivat Rex.  
\*\*\*\*\*

What does this tell us? There are no pictures of the Moor Street theatre, but from this advert we can tell it had two galleries and theatre 'machinery', and therefore must have been a fairly substantial building. The prices listed suggests that the tickets were available to cater from working-class to more well-to-do patronage. The 'Grand Masque' listed indicates a theatre capable of fairly elaborate stage effects; and, the line 'No person can be admitted behind the Scenes' refers to the custom of audience members sitting on the stage itself.

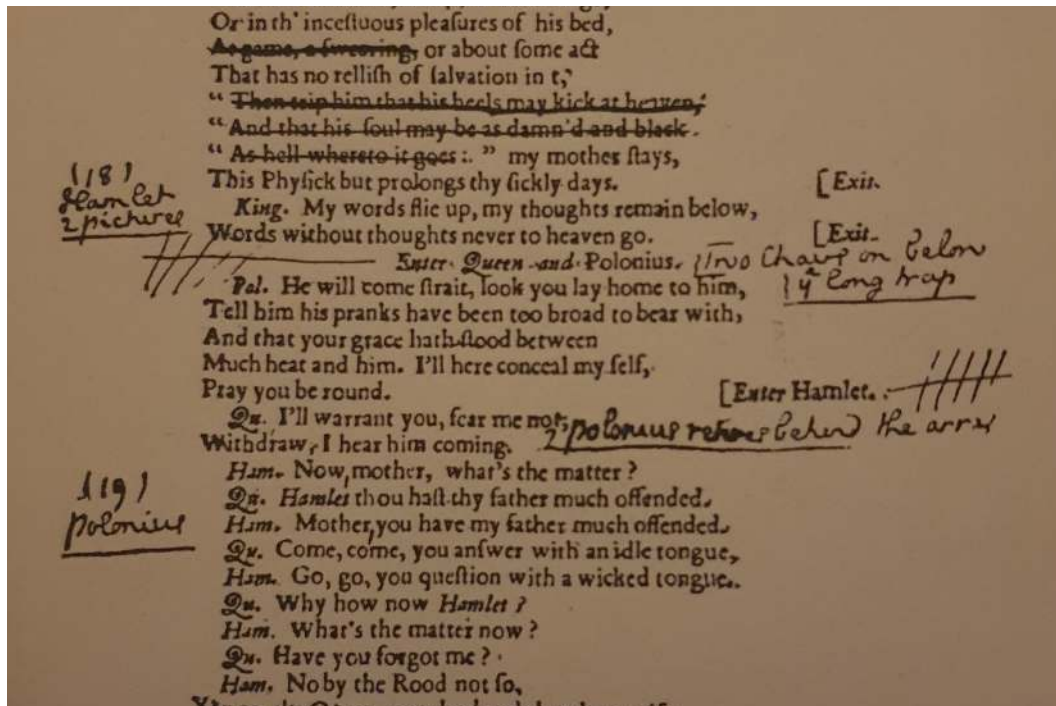
Even as a strolling company, Ward's was renowned for their high quality productions, and unlike other touring players, they would establish themselves in a town for ten to twelve weeks at a time. He set out to produce theatrical experiences in the provinces which were a match for London, in their reverence to Shakespeare and in the elaborate production design.

'... with Grand Funeral Procession and Solemn Dirge set to music by Signor Pasqualli, several nights running to crowded audiences whose kind applause is an instance of their willingness to encourage a good moral theatrical performance when conducted with decency and order; both of which being in the power of the company, their spectators may depend upon their making them their pride and they will omit neither expense nor industry to make the evening's entertainment rational and agreeable. Their plays will be collected from the best authors as Shakespeare, Dryden, Otway, Rowe, Lee, Congreve, Vanbrugh, steel, etc. In a few days, they will perform a celebrated pantomime entertainment called 'Harlequin Ranger,; the scenery, machinery and all other decorations entirely new.'  
(*Glocester Journal*, 6.2.1753; 6.3.1753)

This extract from a review of one of their performances gives insight into Ward's fascination with procession, pomp, pantomime and spectacle, as well as the technical and design innovations to pull these off with a touring company. The review also describes the performance with words like 'moral', 'decency', 'order', 'pride', 'rational', 'agreeable' - placing it as suitable entertainment for all classes, from servant maid to magistrate.

Further evidence that exists of Ward's life, illuminates us on the performance texts used by touring companies in Georgian England. He is known for the fact that he was the owner of two of the earliest prompt books of *Hamlet* in existence; a significant piece of Shakespeare archival evidence which the scholars, James G McManaway and Ann Thompson, have done extensive work on.

Prompt books are one of the most invaluable documents for theatre historians to piece together how a play was performed in the past. They contain cuts to the text, entrances and exits of cast, often stage business, records of lighting and special effects. These give us information on which editions of the plays theatre's used, what lines they cut, kept and rewrote, who the actors were, what props were used, even how the actors were placed on the stage.



Ward's annotations to the earliest prompt book of *Hamlet*, reprinted in McManaway's essay.

For centuries prompt books were made from either existing printed editions of the plays, or specially printed theatrical editions. Ward's *Hamlet* prompt books were formed from Shakespeare Quarto editions (early printings of Shakespeare's work) dated 1676 and 1683.

Ward's prompt books come from a set now known as *Smock Alley Prompt Books*, as they originated from that theatre in Dublin in the late seventeenth century. They mostly comprise of Quarto and Folio texts, which are still often used by theatre companies today; electronic versions and thankfully not the original books - the Third Folio, of which another *Smock Alley Hamlet* prompt book comprised, can be bought for around £400,000.00.

It is one of the misfortunes of the Birmingham Shakespeare Collection that, soon after its establishment there was a fire in 1879 that destroyed many precious items, including two of the prompt books that came from the same source as Ward's, *Smock Alley* in Dublin. The books, donated by Halliwell-Phillips, were early performance editions of *Julius Caesar* and *Troilus and Cressida*.

In a study of Ward's prompt books, McManaway, suggests that he edited *Hamlet* for performance around 1740, the year that he established the Moor Street Theatre in Birmingham. Given Ward's proven dedication to performing Shakespeare, it is not a stretch of the imagination to suppose that a Shakespeare play topped the bill on the opening night of Moor Street; and the author of this piece chooses to believe it was likely to be *Hamlet*.

Ward's *Hamlet* prompt books (now held in the John Hopkins University Library in the US), have provided us with interesting findings on stage practices of strolling players in the eighteenth century.

In 1709, Nicholas Rowe published the first illustrated edition of Shakespeare's *Works*; the illustrations believed to represent scenes as they were staged in that period. In the 'closet scene' of *Hamlet*, in which Gertrude is confronted by her son over her choice of husband, Ward notes



Illustration of *Hamlet* from Nicholas Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare's works, held in the Shakespeare Collection, Library of Birmingham

that Hamlet enters with two pictures. In Rowe's edition, two paintings of the kings are placed on walls. In the name of practicality and expense for a touring company, Ward has Hamlet enter with, what were likely to be, two miniatures - a stage convention which we can still see in productions today.

A brief biography of Ward can be found in the *Biographical Dictionary of Eighteenth Century Actors and Actresses...* but the author of his entry in the publication admits the story of his life is full of holes and doubtful information. One story, however, tells of how, after he played *Othello* to raise money for the Shakespeare bust, a man called William Shakespeare Hart, a glazier, who lived in Bridge Street in Stratford-upon-Avon, claiming to be a descendant of the Bard, gave Ward a pair of white gloves that had 'oft covered' Shakespeare's hands. These gloves, Ward gave to Garrick in 1769, so he could wear them whilst delivering the *Jubilee Ode* at his legendary festival in Stratford-upon-Avon that year.

'Garrick himself was attired in his velvet Jubilee suit. Trimmed with gold and lined with taffeta, the colour shifted in the light from mole to amber; he wore a long waistcoat with thirteen gold buttons and a rather special pair of white gloves – they had been presented to him by the actor John Ward, and were said to be the very ones worn on stage by Shakespeare himself'. I. McIntyre, *Garrick*, 1999, 421. [Description possibly from the *London Chronicle* 5-7 September 1769].

That story may be true, or it may be that Mr Ward, who had achieved only a provincial level of success as a Shakespearean actor wanted something belonging to him to be present at the Shakespeare event of the century. Yes, this author is speculating again.

With no knowledge of their origin, the gloves were given to Sarah Siddons in 1822 by Garrick's widow on his death. Siddons bequeathed them to her daughter, Mrs George Combe. They eventually ended up in the possession of American academic and Shakespeare library founder, Horace Howard Furness, on 17 January 1874, when he was given them by Fanny Kemble, another famous actress from the Ward dynasty. Furness edited the 1870 Variorum editions of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Around the room he worked in were photographs of his fellow Shakespeare



'Shakespeare's Gloves', now held of the RSC Theatre Collection

enthusiasts and friends, one of which was Samuel Timmins, the man instrumental in setting up the Shakespeare Memorial Library in Birmingham with George Dawson.

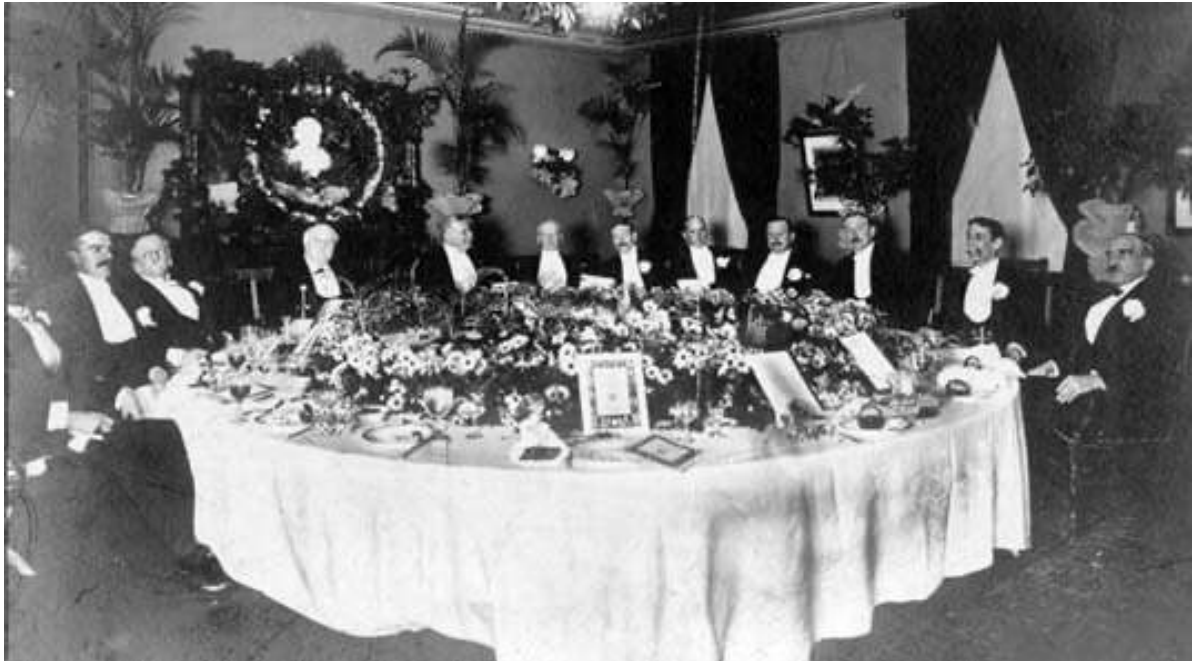


Image from the Horace Howard Furness Shakespeare Library web site.

The neglected Mr Ward has a remarkable history and legacy in the performance of Shakespeare through the theatrical success of his touring company which, as Price writes, ‘made the temporary theatre in barn, hall or inn the centre of polite provincial life and brought London tastes and diversions to the country towns.’

The theatrical upbringing which he passed on to his children, and grandchildren was one of ‘decency and order’, of moral and civic good, unheard of for a touring company at that time. His son-in-law, Roger Kemble, continued with this ethos, taking over where Ward left off. The standing of his grandchildren, John Philip Kemble and Sarah Siddons in the profession is evidence, not only of a deep understanding of Shakespeare in performance and its potential, running in the veins, but of the public perception of theatre as highly respectable and ennobling entertainment.

Managed by Ward in the 1740s, the Moor Street Theatre was the first of its kind in Birmingham. Not able to compete against the larger, purpose-built King Street Theatre, which opened in 1751, the Moor Street Theatre closed in 1763.

Of course, for the now established home of Shakespeare performance, Stratford-upon-Avon, performances of the Bard’s works are standard, but Ward provided the first recorded Shakespeare performance in the poet’s place of birth.

James McManaway, wrote of Ward, ‘... he has a perpetual if modest claim on Shakespeareans.’ His great love of Shakespeare was evident from his repertoire, his company’s standing, and the monumental legacy which passed through the Kemble acting dynasty.

After one performance of *King Lear*, in 1740, soon after the unveiling of the Shakespeare statue in Westminster Abbey, Ward recited Milton’s lines on Shakespeare and appeared in the pose of the statue itself! Now that’s a Shakespeare devotee.

Could it be that Ward wished to establish a theatre dedicated to Shakespeare to coincide with the immortalising of the nation’s poet in Westminster’s Poet’s Corner? It is a wonderful coincidence

and fitting tribute to the man from the West Midlands, if not.

On that statue you can read Prospero's lines from Act 4 of *The Tempest*, his last play:

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous  
palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve;  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind.

Memory of John Ward might have faded; it has certainly been neglected, but, Ward's impact on Shakespeare in performance on a national, and therefore international scale, is immeasurable. It may be that we will never know his full story but it appears he, before Garrick, was doing all he could to ensure that his life was a personal monument to Shakespeare. He was a pioneer of performance who chose to base himself in Birmingham, a city responsive and ready to make Shakespeare their own.



Statue of Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey,  
erected in 1740

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Smock Alley Prompt Book Website:  
<https://bsuva.org/bsuva/promptbook/ShamHamP.html>



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future  
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

