

## “Line...?!”

### Prompt Books of the Theatre Royal, Birmingham

The theatre archives revolving around the work of the Theatre Royal, or New Street Theatre, Birmingham are one of the glories of the Birmingham Shakespeare Library. It is the great theatre archive of the Collection and pre-Birmingham Rep, the Theatre Royal was the place to see Shakespeare!

In the archive there are to be found prompt books, playbills, reviews, images, and even part of the masonry. For the study of regional late-Georgian and early-Victorian theatre it is a fantastic resource.

Prompt books are technical working documents, mostly known by people in the theatre world. They are the texts used by managers in order to ensure that plays are staged as the director intended. In modern theatres, the Assistant Stage Manager, often referred to as the ASM, uses the prompt book during a performance to ensure that everything happens on stage when it should, including dialogue, lighting, special effects, music and actors movements. All of the actions and technical details are noted in the prompt book, a marked-up script. They are invaluable documents for the theatre historian, trying to piece together what a production from the past might have looked like.

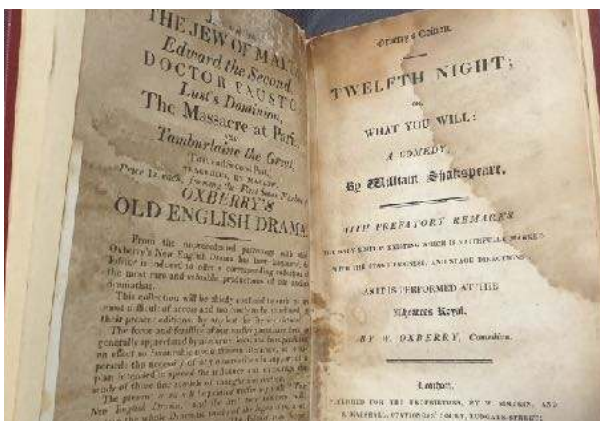
Prompt books are also invaluable for documenting which editions of the plays have been used; whether different published editions of Shakespeare’s works, or texts created for the staging of the plays by different theatres or managers. In the prompt book you can see what lines have been cut, where the director has felt fit to amend the text, reassign speeches to different characters, or miss characters out completely.

The prompt books in the Theatre Royal archive are a very mixed bag; but, that mix tells you a lot about what was performed, how it was performed and the theatrical tastes of the period.

Those prompt books printed by the London publisher Oxberry, are striking in their modern approach to editing and printing. They are reminiscent of the type of Shakespeare’s works to be found in bookshops today.

The text is interspersed with printed notes explaining the meaning of words; references to old sayings, traditions and beliefs; explanations of literature that Shakespeare is referring to - for example, Greek or Roman myths and legends; there is character analysis; stage direction, and occasionally stage diagrams indicating how the actors should be arranged on stage. The arrangement of the notes is more easy to follow than some modern editions and are worth a study in their own right.

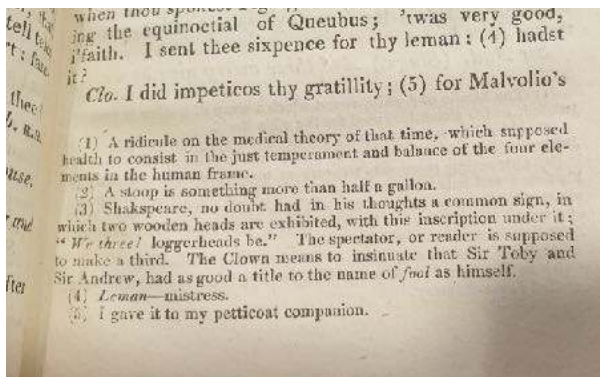
The *Twelfth Night*, dated 1821 is a fine example of the detail printed into these editions - editions which, as the title page indicates are “As it is performed at the Theatres Royal.” So, for Theatres Royal, there was a standard text that was printed and circulated to those theatres - an industry standard as it were. Undoubtedly, these standard texts were treated differently by theatre



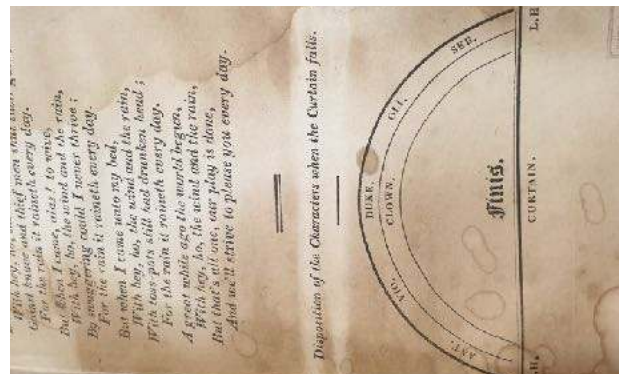
Title page of *Twelfth Night* prompt book, printed by Oxberry for Theatres Royal (1821)



References in prompt book to stage entrances and exits.



Notes and stage directions in the prompt book for Twelfth Night (1821)

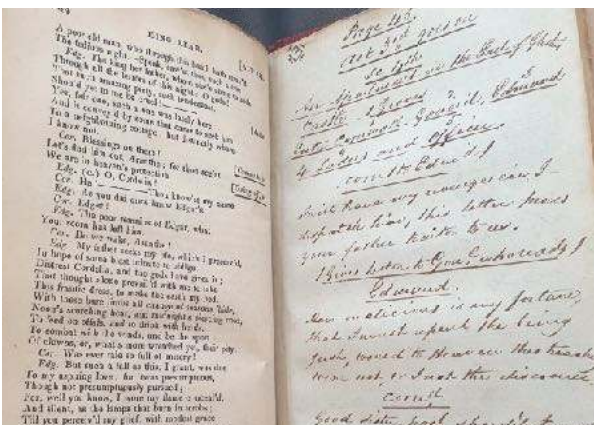


Stage diagram for the placing of characters in the final scene.

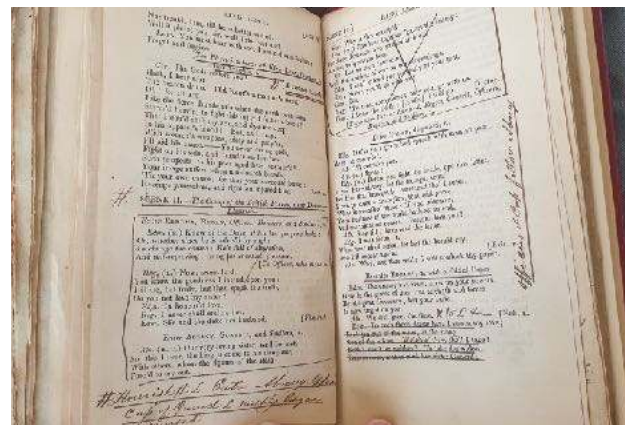
managers up and down the country but it is nonetheless, it is interesting that a 'royal' standard was felt needed or desirable for the presentation of Shakespeare's plays.

Not all of the Birmingham Theatre Royal prompt books are Oxberry editions, and many of them are much more heavily massaged texts. Shakespeare would be edited down for various reasons but at the Theatre Royal it would have been to bring down the running time of the play so that it could fit in to an evening's entertainment with other works.

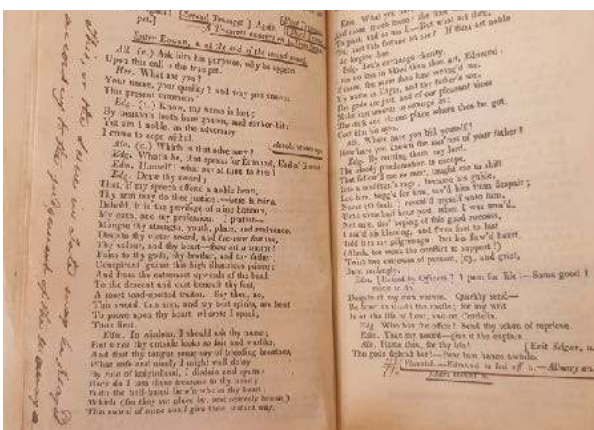
The two prompt books of *King Lear* are a lovely example of eighteenth century theatre taste. The earlier one, dated 1831, a version edited by David Garrick, along the lines of the Nahum Tate



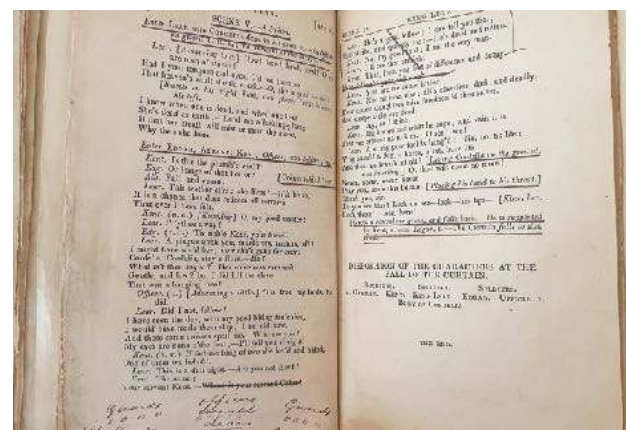
David Garrick's version of King Lear (1831 prompt book), with Edgar and Cordelia romance. Edits to the version written and bound in with the play text.



Prompt book page, clearly indicating cuts to text and stage directions.



Note down the left-hand side of the page of 1843 version indicates there are two different stagings of this scene in the play: 'This, or the scene in Tate may be played according to the judgement of the manager.'



Final scene of the heavily edited 1843 text. The play ends with Lear's final words; and the placing of the characters on the stage is indicated.

version of *King Lear* - a rewrite including a romantic relationship between Edgar and Cordelia. The later from 1843 is a heavily edited version of Shakespeare's original text.

During this period, many of Shakespeare's plays were effectively rewritten, focusing on popular characters. The late-Georgians and early-Victorians had a great time messing about with Shakespeare, without the precious reverence we have to his original words today. They had fun with Shakespeare, converting what they felt was outdated with versions to suit their time; an approach more likely to be practiced by film-makers than theatres nowadays.

One of the popular adaptations, was *Catharine and Petruchio*; written by David Garrick in 1754. This reworking of *The Taming of the Shrew* was performed more than Shakespeare's original during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It sticks to the original plot, and uses some of Shakespeare's language but condenses the play into three acts. Garrick also alters the ending to have Petruchio claim that his 'taming' was a means of establishing the terms of their relationship, that he's happy to cast off that abusive role, and that they'll love each other equally. However, the final words are...

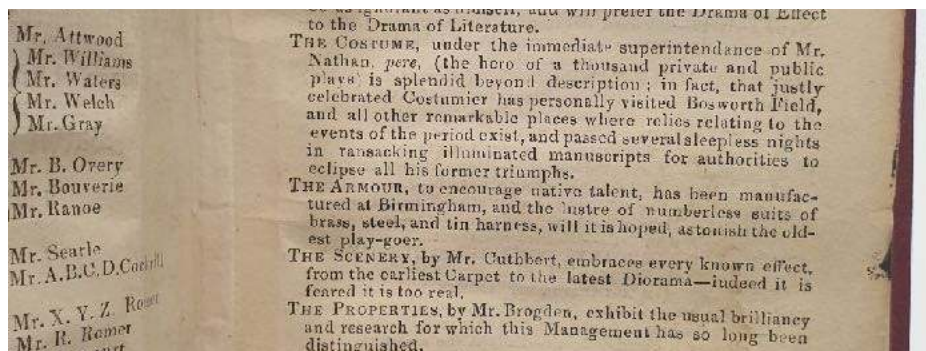
How shameful 'tis when women are so simple  
 To offer war where they should kneel for peace,  
 Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,  
 Where bound to love, to honor, and obey.  
 (Act 3, lines 63-66)



Shakespeare's works were also completely rewritten as farces and operatic burlesques, or travesties. Written in rhyme with songs, dances and comedic skits, these are basically the equivalent of giving Shakespeare to the country's top comedians and letting them do what they like with them. Sounds like a wonderful idea, doesn't it?; we'd look forward to Harry Hill's version of *Titus Andronicus*!

The Theatre Royal collection holds four travesties of the plays of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Richard III*.

The Shakespeare travesties created farces out of his great plays. The fact that these were put on as public entertainments assumes, and demonstrates, the fact that the working class knew Shakespeare's stories - if they didn't, they wouldn't get the joke. In the front matter of the travestie of *Richard III*, entitled *Kinge Richard Ye Third : Ye Battel of Bosworth Field* - it gives suggested programme notes which, themselves are a satirical stab at the nature and style of performance at the time - elaborate settings, historical accuracy in setting, elaborateness of costume.



Prompt book for *Kinge Richard Ye Third* by Charles Selby, written 1844.

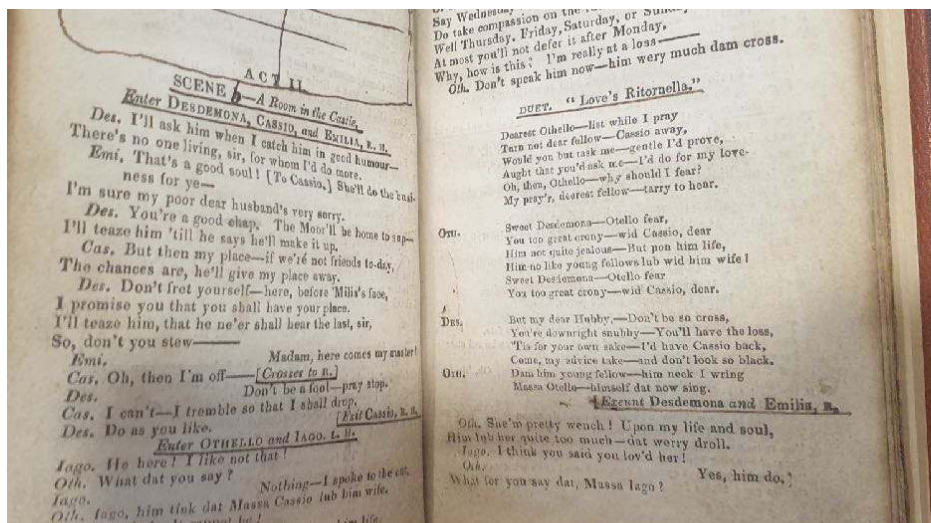
However, comedy doesn't date well and these, sometimes anarchic takes on Shakespeare's works are also extremely problematic.

The racist language and stereotypes used in these texts, are deeply offensive, upsetting, and demonstrate the entirely white, colonial perspective of the time. Their representations of character and use of race to denigrate for comedy, reflects and exposes contemporary racist attitudes, making them difficult reading. The dehumanising and 'othering' of black characters and culture for comic effect, is appalling; and sadly, until relatively recently this offensive strain in comedy has been 'accepted'. One only needs to look back at the 1970 and 80s to see racist stereotypes which were considered as palatable, especially by night-club comics and in TV sitcoms.



Prompt book for *Othello Travestie* by Maurice G Dowling, written 1834.

The most problematic of the travesties is, not surprisingly, the *Othello Travestie: an operatic burlesque burletta* in two acts (1834). Permeated with racist views and language, the play undermines the dignity which Shakespeare bestows on Othello; his language, mocked and made ugly in cod African-English:



Racist representation of language in *Othello Travestie* (1834)

The *Othello* burlesque is the most extreme, offensive example of racist references for comedy in the prompt book collection, but not the only one. In *King Richard Ye Third (1844)*, when wooing Lady Anne, Richard makes reference to Anne's beauty making Venus look like a 'nigger'.

At the end of *Romeo and Juliet Travestie: or, a cup of cold pison (1859)*, Romeo and Paris debate on how they're going to help bury each other. Paris shoves Romeo in a tomb and then inters himself. The whole cast come in and sing a lament, at which point Queen Mab rises in front of the tomb and sings:

I've just come up from down below,  
My name's Queen Mab, I'd have you know,  
To set things right before I go,  
And all the dead folks rally -  
So cease your fears, and stop your tears,  
And don't give way to grief, my dears.  
The dead folks all I'll rally.

At which point the stage direction reads,

[Queen Mab] 'touches [the] tomb with her wand - the front disappears showing Mercutio, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet and Paris, sitting on five chairs, like 'nigger' serenaders with banjo, tambourine, bones, etc. They immediately take up the chorus and the characters in front dance).

The figure of Shakespeare, dressed in white, in the attitude of Roubilliac's statue, rises through trap, holding up his finger with a menacing attitude. The nurse then points out to Shakespeare that he wrote a burlesque himself, in *A Midsummer Nights Dream* - to which Bard descends back into the floor and the nurse declares - "I had him there!"

Disparaging language, shaming of appearance, and mocking cultural status in the name of comedy, make these works unplayable in the 21st century.

Birmingham, and the wider country, may be multi-cultural, but our collective culture is still viewed through a predominantly white gaze. The negative power of oppressive words and attitudes is one which is thankfully being tackled by Black Lives Matter and archives on a national and international scale. The study of these comic play texts, throws light on the precedence of racist attitudes still deeply embedded in British society and culture, and definitely requires further examination.

As demonstrated, a journey through the prompt books of the Theatre Royal, Birmingham is fascinating, illuminating and thought-provoking. As pieces of archival evidence they reveal so much more than the purpose of their intended use. They are incredible performance, cultural and historical documents reflecting the very complex world in which they are created. As a theatre historian, I have always found them the richest source of study; constantly throwing new light, not just on Shakespeare but on the people who made him.

*Karin Thomson, E2E Heritage Ambassador*



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

