

# UC Berkeley

## 2016 SURF Conference Proceedings

**Title**

400 Years Fresh - The Elizabethan Era Stage

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/03k3s7q8>

**Author**

Alexander, Peter

**Publication Date**

2016-10-01

Undergraduate

### 400 Years Fresh – The Elizabethan Era Stage

For a SURF SSH fellowship, I explored a debate pertaining to England's Elizabethan era stage. When I use the phrase "the Elizabethan era" in this document, I really mean the time period 1575-1642, covering the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I, the reigns of James I and Charles I. The reason for my exploration centers around a debate I stumbled upon when preparing to produce Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* in the Elizabethan era performance style. According to many contemporary accounts of the Elizabethan stage, performance times of complete works ranged from two to three hours, without exceeding three. How did Elizabethan theatre companies manage these performance times when modern companies cannot achieve similar performance of the same works?

Scholars who argue that Elizabethan theatre companies achieved these efficient performance times refer to accounts from the period. For example, in the Prologue of *A Hog Hath Lost His Pearl* (1613), Robert Tailor assures, "For this author saith, if't prove distasteful, He only grieves you spend two hours so wasteful."<sup>1</sup> We have many accounts like this. Although a modern audience would accept two or three hours as a normal performance length (and it is), some scholars have argued that Elizabethan theatre companies performed scripts with lengths of more than 4000 lines, such as *Hamlet*, in no longer than two to three hours.<sup>2</sup> Another scholar, Jonathan Hart believes, "if they wrote 'two hours,' then we have no option but to think they meant exactly what they said."<sup>3</sup> Do we have no option than but to believe these accounts, given that we also have accounts that seem to say something different?<sup>4</sup>

One can oscillate back and forth on accounts from the period that support different lengths of performance for Elizabethan plays. However, rather than trying to judge the validity of 400-year-old accounts, I explored this debate by looking at actual scripts used by theatre companies from the period, called promptbooks. These promptbooks are labeled as such because they were held and utilized by "bookkeepers," Elizabethan era stage managers. The modern term "stage manager" refers to the person whose role it is to manage the stage – a task that involves keeping track of all staging for a performance (from simple entrances and exits to onstage flight involving a complex series of invisible ropes supporting characters hanging from the rafters).

In order to begin my exploration, I consulted Charles H. Shattuck's *The Shakespeare Promptbooks* and found an existing list of Shakespeare promptbooks from the first part of the seventeenth century (until 1642).<sup>5</sup> I also did some research in the British Library and found copies of non-Shakespeare promptbooks from the early seventeenth century, such as Beaumont and Fletcher's *Bonduca, Queen of Britannie*.<sup>6</sup>

I examined both manuscript and printed versions of early seventeenth-century promptbooks. These included Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* and the aforementioned *Bonduca*.<sup>7</sup> The printed promptbooks I found came in two formats – quarto and folio. Quarto and folio refer

---

<sup>1</sup> Klein, David. "Time Allotted for an Elizabethan Performance." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18.4 (1967): 434-38. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/2867646?seq=2#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2867646?seq=2#page_scan_tab_contents), accessed on July 20, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Klein, 434.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the prologue of *Follies Anatomy*, Thomas Hutton claims "The Globe tomorrow acts a pleasant play: in hearing it consume this irksome day." Klein, 435.

<sup>5</sup> Shattuck, Charles, *The Shakespeare Promptbooks*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Beaumont and Fletcher, *Bonduca, Queene of Brittainie*. 1620-1640. Add MS 36758, Western Manuscripts, The British Library, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, William. *King Henry IV*. Ca. 1623. MS V.b. 34, FSL Collection. Folger Shakespeare Library, n.p.

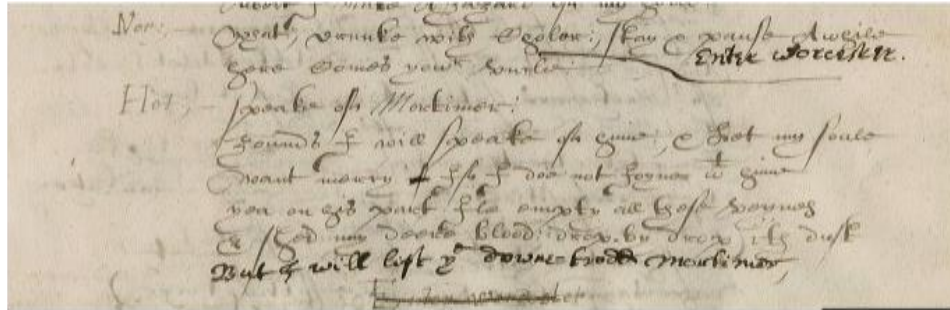
to the size of the page of an early printed document (resulting from the number of folds in the original sheet) but for the purpose of this document, it will prove useful to think of a quarto print as an older, isolated version of a printed text. On the other hand, a folio is usually the first printed text that contains the complete works of an author. For example Shakespeare's "First Folio," published in 1623, appeared years after many individual, printed quartos of his texts.

For quarto promptbooks, I examined Shakespeare's *Much Adoe About Nothing* in the Victoria and Albert Museum's National Art Gallery. I also looked at a variety of Shakespeare promptbooks in folio format. From the University of Edinburgh, I looked at two promptbooks of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of *A Comedy of Errors*, and one of *Hamlet*. At the Biblioteca Universitaria di Padova, Italy, I looked at promptbooks for Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth*, and *A Winter's Tale*.

Once I had found these early promptbooks, I found quarto or folio versions of the "same" text that were not used for performance. For example, I found non-prompt quartos of *Much Adoe About Nothing* and *Bonduca Queen of Brittanie* online and I used these non-prompt texts for comparison. While examining the prompt and non-prompt versions of a script side by side, I looked for differences between the prompt and non-prompt. Once I had identified all differences between the two and had noted all staging in the promptbooks, I would think, compare, and then think again (in hopes of finding patterns, differences, and ways of communicating prompt and non-prompt versions of the early scripts).

**Findings:** I noticed many changes between versions of the "same" play scripts. Furthermore, the compilers of the manuscript promptbooks I examined had clearly consulted non-prompt versions of the their texts, and so it became clear that early editors had molded these promptbooks with other versions of the script at hand. We see this process at work in the manuscript promptbook of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*. Its date is later than all corresponding quartos of the same play and an editor adds in / deletes lines from one (or multiple) quarto(s), as he or she sees fit. Figures 1 and 2 below show the second quarto (1599) and of the manuscript promptbook (ca. 1623).

*Now, What? drunk with cholcr? stay and pause a while,  
Here comes your Uncle.  
Hot. Speak of Mortimer?  
Zounds I will speak of him, and let my soul  
Want mercy, if I do not joyn with him:  
Yea on his part, Ile empty all those veins,  
And shed my dear blood, drop by drop, i' th dust,  
But I will lift the down-trod Mortimer,*



When looking at the last line of both the quarto and the manuscript, one can see that an editor adds the line, “But I will lift the down-trodden Mortimer...” to the manuscript.<sup>8</sup> The line addition implies that whoever added it probably consulted another version of the script of *Henry IV, Part I* in the creation of this promptbook.<sup>9</sup> There also exist examples where the editor changes lines in the manuscript to his own words, removing lines that are found in the quartos.

Similar additions and subtractions exist in *Bonduca*. At first, an editor attributes the line, “well said,” to the “Eldest Daughter.”<sup>10</sup> However, presumably after consulting the quarto or another edition or performance of *Bonduca*, the editor crosses out Eldest Daughter and gives the line to Caras. In the quarto version of the non-prompt script I examined, Caras speaks the line.<sup>11</sup>

Even non-prompt quartos and folios changed from one version to the next. For example, many know the first quarto of *Hamlet* as “The Bad Quarto.” In this quarto (dating from 1603), one can find the famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy at the beginning of play, rather than at the start of Act III, as in the First Folio (1623). Furthermore, the speech content does not resemble that which we find in subsequent versions and modern productions.

Why do these additions and subtractions matter? For one, they confirm that different versions of the “same” scripts circulated. Additionally, changes to scripts used as promptbooks affected the staging of these plays. But what were bookkeepers changing and how did their changes affect performances, particularly in regards to timing?

---

<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The Historie of Henrie the Fourth ; vvith the battell at Shrewsburie...* London, 1599. TS STC 22281 Copy 1, FSL Collection, The Folger Shakespeare Library.

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare, *King Henry IV*, ff. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Beaumont and Fletcher, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Beaumont and Fletcher. *Bonduca, a Tragedy*. 1718. London. TS 1346.d6, General Reference Collection DRT Digital Store. The British Library. accessed July 27, 2016.

[http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc\\_100025209773.0x000001#ark:/81055/vdc\\_100025209796.0x00000c](http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_100025209773.0x000001#ark:/81055/vdc_100025209796.0x00000c)

### **Promptbook Cut Patterns:**

**Cuts for characters:** Editors often cut characters not vital to plot, such as servants or “colours” (the Elizabethan term for soldiers). Editors also frequently cut women’s roles. Unfortunately, women actors were rarely (if at all) included as actors in Elizabethan performances. In one promptbook of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the vital character of Titania is all but cut, with the only surviving remnants of her performance coming in the form of a few lines that help to make sense of dialogue from Oberon, one of the show’s leading male characters.<sup>12</sup>

**Case Study:** At the end of a scene from a seventeenth-century promptbook of Shakespeare’s *Much Adoe About Nothing*, two female characters, Marge and Ursula, who do not appear in the rest of this promptbook, enter and speak lines. Immediately following their lines, Hero requests “Help to dress me good coz, good Marge, good Ursula.”<sup>13</sup> There exists no other prompt commentary on this section of this scene, but given their exclusion from the rest of the prompt, we may conclude that the otherwise cut Marge and Ursula enter solely to help Hero get dressed, thus expediting the change and aiding the efficiency of the performance.

**Properties:** Editors often cut text that included large and potentially expensive properties. For example, many modern performances of *Henry IV, Part I* include a large, travelling cart in a scene during which Falstaff robs “travelers.” In the aforementioned seventeenth-century manuscript promptbook, the script excludes the travelers and only mentions the robbery, implying that it takes place off stage.<sup>14</sup> This omission removes the need for a cumbersome cart that’s entrance and exit would undoubtedly slow the performance.

**Conclusions / Relevance:** Different versions of the “same” play scripts reveal aspects about Elizabethan era performances. Text in early promptbooks frequently varies from the text in a promptbook’s non-prompt equivalent. I was able to identify three types of cuts in the promptbooks (that I know of) – for characters (especially women), for large props, and later in the era, for language that does not necessarily advance plot.

In addition to my findings, my research leads me to other points of exploration. In *Much Adoe About Nothing*, I noticed a quick, one-time addition of two otherwise excluded characters to help dress another, a modification that helps quicken the scenic transition. Even though this moment demonstrates one staging method that created the efficiency I hoped to find, the observation also leads to more questions. How exactly do the Marge and Ursula characters aid in dressing Hero? Does it occur on or off stage? These specificities (and many others) prove so far unanswerable for me and I hope that future promptbook exploration will elucidate more specificity in regards to Elizabethan era staging mechanics.

I also hope that some of my findings prove applicable to the modern practice of Elizabethan era theatre. Modern companies, such as those that perform at Shakespeare’s Globe in London, continue to emulate early performance style. With the application of some of these findings, I hope that modern theatre companies can find ways to more effectively and more fully perform Elizabethan era texts.

---

<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Nights Dreame*. London, 1623. TS. The University of Edinburgh.

<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Much Adoe About Nothing*. London, 1600. TS 1 v. ; 4to, Dyce Collection. The National Art Library.

<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare, *King Henry IV*, ff. 15.

