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The Pitman Project

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The Pitman Project

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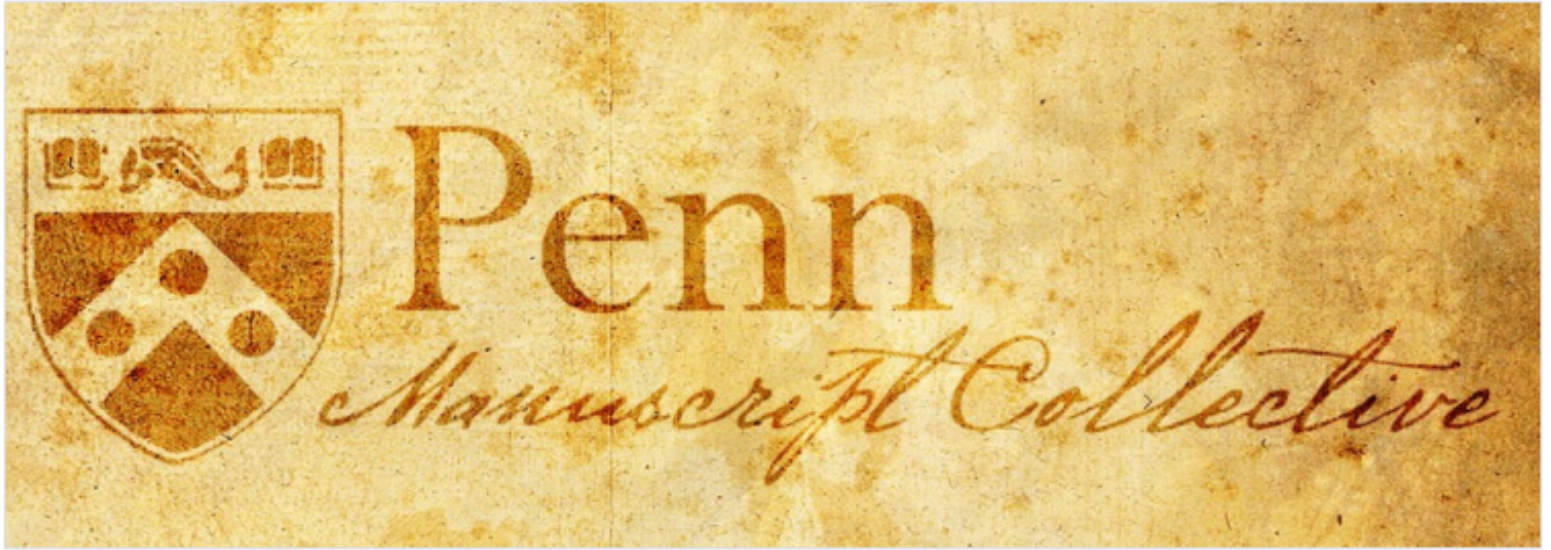
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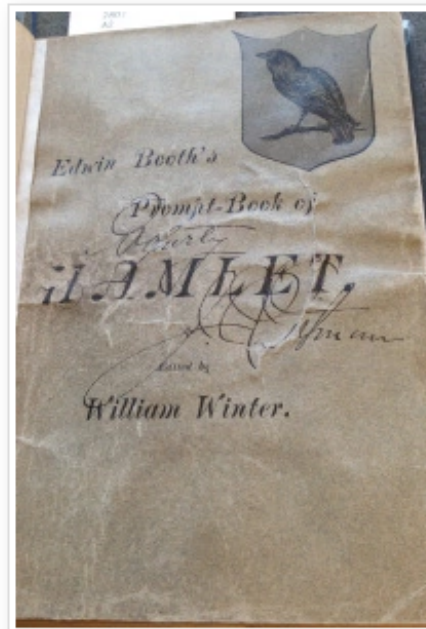
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The Pitman Project

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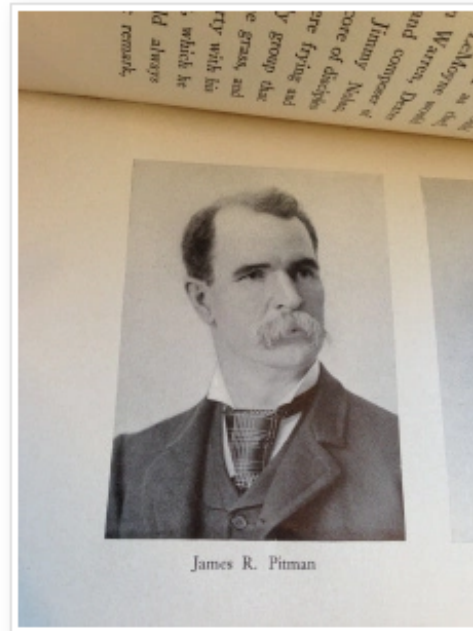
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The Project

I was introduced to J. R. Pitman by my Shakespeare professor, Zachary Lesser, who suggested a *Hamlet* promptbook dated from 1878 as a good introduction to manuscript research. The mystery surrounding the identity of J. R. Pitman, whose signature embossed the cover of the promptbook, drew me to the project. I would

signature embosses the cover of the promptbook, drew me to the project. I would eventually find other promptbooks owned by J. R. Pitman, giving me a clearer picture of his work and allowing me to hazard guesses on the dates of his annotations. My work on Edwin (my name for the *Hamlet* promptbook, an edition printed by the famed actor Edwin Booth) and his brethren is far from complete, but this project's aim is to recognize the legacy of J. R. Pitman, an esteemed director partially lost to history.

J. R. Pitman



James R. Pitman

At the onset of this project, I knew nothing about J. R. Pitman except that his signature was on the *Hamlet* promptbook. Through my own research I was able to learn more about his working life, first as a prompter at the famed Boston Museum, then as an director at the Castle Square Theatre, also in Boston. His annotations characterize him as a meticulous man, always consistent in his symbols and abbreviations.

While exploring the archives of the Library of Congress's online newspaper database, I came across a few mentions of people named J. R. Pitman, but nothing seemed to fit. Then, in a brief snippet of a column the May 20, 1890 printing of the *St. Paul Daily Globe*:

J. R. Pitman, prompter at the Boston Museum, has filled the position for thirty-five years, and is probably one of the oldest prompters in the United States.

A quick Google search revealed that Edwin Booth, the world-famous actor who had printed the promptbook in use, had performed at the Boston Museum several times throughout his lifetime. I had found our Pitman.

I felt I had already gotten to know Mr. Pitman a bit from his copious notes, and when I discovered him in an old out-of-print book in Penn's library called *Old*

Boston Museum Days (written by Boston Museum actress Kate Ryan), in some ways my impression of him was confirmed.

JAMES R. PITMAN was born in New Zealand of English parentage, in 1842, and his country at an early age. He became a member of the Boston Museum came to the Company in 1863, playing small parts and acting as captain of supernumeraries for some years. Finally, in 1869, he became prompter, a position he held until promoted to that of stage manager.

He was a most efficient prompter, a position of more importance under the old system of constant change in plays than can well be understood now. From his position in the corner of the proscenium on the right of the stage, he controlled all of the stage mechanism. He could signal by bells and raps to the man in the flies who raised and lowered the curtain, to the man who managed the borders, in fact, to all of the unseen workers who had anything to do with the various effects in use during the progress of a play. Thunder, lightning, rain, hail, snow, sunshine, and shadow were at his command. He was an adept at simulating the barking of dogs and the crying of babies. If a carriage seemed to be driving up at the back of the scene, it was Pitman pushing a long pole over the rough boards of the stage, across the grain of the wood. He made the sound of horses coming or going, as the case might be, with the shells of cocoanuts split in halves and emptied of their meat. He sent armies on with a wave of his hand and marched them off again with a crack of his finger. He controlled the orchestra, in the matter of incidental music, by the flash of the footlights. In fact, every movement of his had a meaning for some one.

He was a slave to duty, and was absolutely just in all his dealings with his fellows. He did not shield the delinquent nor attempt to curry favor with those in high places. Actors sometimes tried to shield themselves and blame each other for any failure to speak at the proper time. It was useless for the guilty one to appeal to Pitman. He would say, "No, Sir, you are at fault. Didn't I hold the book?"

The prompt book was the law from which there was no appeal. Pitman would give the word at first in a loud, penetrating whisper, but if that did not start the dramatic wheels, he would shout it in a tone that would reach the back row in the gallery. I have heard of an old prompter who let his mind wander from the book, so that if a word were needed, he sometimes could not tell what had been spoken. At such times he would venture to whisper "Notwithstanding." James R. Pitman was not of that kind. He knew just where the dialogue had halted, and who had stopped the play.

But Homer was said to nod at times, and even Pitman met his fate. "Speed the Plow" was being played for a single night. It had not been very well prepared, and some of the actors were not easy in their lines. In those days the greenroom was

in a little triangular space just behind the prompt corner on the right of the stage. Frank Hardenberg, an excellent character actor, was standing in the greenroom door just behind the prompter. Pitman heard breakers ahead, as the voices of the actors on the stage ceased, but he knew who was wanted. He turned from his chair in the corner without rising from his stooping position, glanced into the greenroom, and not seeing the person he was after, turned and bolted down-stairs to the dressing rooms. Meanwhile Hardenberg still stood looking at the stage, saying, as he coolly surveyed the scene, "Three of them! All sticking!" until poor Pitman came rushing back, saying, "It's you! It's you! Go on!"

Woe betide the poor actor who complained that Pitman gave the word too loud, or was too abrupt and excited when he came down to the dressing room and shouted, "Mr. —, the stage is waiting for you." Pitman had an exquisite revenge the next time that actor made him wait. He would appear at the dressing room door and say in a low, casual tone, "Mr. —, the stage has been waiting for you for five minutes." Stage waits were not common, so we remember the few times they did happen.

...

The most careful man will sometimes make mistakes. Mr. Pitman hardly ever failed to inspect the stage before ringing up the curtain, thus making sure that actors, scenes, and properties were in their correct positions. He failed once in all the years that I knew him! The play was a little domestic comedy, "The Chimney Corner." It had been given all the week, so vigilance was relaxed. Mr. Robert McClannin, a splendid actor of old men's parts, was to be discovered sleeping in a chair by the fireside. Up went the curtain; he was not there! Mr. Pitman tried to persuade him to go on and take his place in the chair. He could have done so without attracting the attention of one person in the audience, but his dignity as an actor was at stake, and he would not sacrifice that to save the scene, so the curtain was rung down, and the play started again. This was an extreme case. Many actors would have tried to save the scene, but our "old man" knew that he was clearly within his rights, and nothing could move him.

Dear old Pitman! His "still small voice" in the prompt place was often our salvation. He always managed to live near the sea, and to keep a rowboat. There were many ardent disciples of Izaak Walton in the Company, and they made trips down the harbor in Pitman's boat, sometimes for cod at Faun Bar below Deer Island and, in the smelting season, all about the upper and lower harbor in quest of those shiny little fish. During a running play, they would even go down for half a day on Wednesday or Saturday, and return in time for the matinee. The catch was frequently abundant, for they were skillful anglers, and they delighted to bring their spoils up to the Museum as a gift to their fellow players. You may believe it was no mean gift. Such absolutely fresh fish could not be bought at any price in the Boston market. Nate Salsbury, J. W. Norris (who became the husband

of pretty Josie Batchelder), and James Burrows were usually of this party.

...

Those were delectable chestnuts that sputtered around the fire at Mystic Pond, and it was a contented group of actors that came back from their little outing and resumed their work of amusing the Boston public. Pitman was supremely happy at all such times, and never had to give the word but once when he held up his plate for another helping of fish and fried potatoes.

...

Mr. Pitman, after leaving the Museum, had many years of active and honorable work as stage director at the Castle Square and other theatres. He acquired a competency of this world's goods, and did not answer to the final summons until February, 1914, at the age of seventy-two.

This colorful depiction of Mr. Pitman brings out many intimate details of his character that correspond quite well to my impression of him. He was a hands-on prompter, gifted at voicing special effects, clapping coconut shells *Monty Python* style, and was always in control of everything around him. He seems to have been quite stringent in his vision of the play, with the promptbook as the absolute law, but highly respected by his colleagues and clearly by the author. Nonetheless he had a stubborn streak, was highly demanding of his actors and perhaps a tad too proud. I was delighted to find this portrait of life in the nineteenth-century theatre, a chaotic existence in which actors seldom had enough time to prepare for their parts and a prompter was expected to hold several duties all at once. But Mr. Pitman, the boat-adventuring, chestnut-loving New Zealander, was more than up to the challenge.

I later found another excerpt depicting J. R. Pitman, this time concerning his later work as director of the Castle Square Theatre. From *Six Years of Drama at the Castle Square Theatre*:

With the exception of a half dozen plays he has production during the past six years. His success during these years has afforded pleasure to many thousands of patrons. Unremitting in his labor he personally arranges every detail behind the curtain. His plots for the various heads of department back of the house are marvels of completeness. His plot for the stage carpenter shows what be built or arranged. The plot for the scenic artist guides the scene painters in their work. The property man is given a plot showing the arrangement of all articles used on the stage. The electrician is given a plot for all lighting effects and so on through. All these directions are written or drawn on paper pasted in a continuous roll often more than twenty feet in length. The stage director casts all the plays and his be accepted by the actor without question. Every emergency, from the illness of the

players to the accidents of the mechanical work, must be met by the stage director and the trouble corrected so that the performance may go on with the least friction possible. He directs at every rehearsal, giving the actors the stage business he wishes done to produce the effects he has already studied out. In almost every case the actor is given a manuscript part containing only his own lines and cues. At these rehearsals the parts are fitted together and the actor learns the story of the play and the individual peculiarities of the character he is to portray. He also instructs the supers and extra people in their business and shows them where they fit in. Mr. Pitman is rarely seen in front excepting during a first performance

J. R. Pitman was apparently becoming well known as a director of Hamlet by the time he worked at the Castle Square Theatre. An advertisement for the 1902 performance of Hamlet in the *Cambridge Tribune* name-drops Pitman to attract potential playgoers:

"The fact that this production, like all those of recent years at this theatre, is in the hands of Mr. J. R. Pitman, assures a following of the best stage traditions regarding the presentation of this play, as he has probably been associated with more of the standard performances of "Hamlet" than any stage director now in active service in this country. Great care is promised by the management in the way of stage settings and costumes. The usual distribution of chocolate bonbons will be made at the Monday matinee.

J. R. Pitman's annotations are characterized by lists of parts and prompts, detailed stage directions, and, frequently, his own drawings. He was fastidious with every kind of stage direction, from music to lighting to character locations. It is remarkable how consistent his style remains through decades of prompt books, some dating from the late 1870s and others likely from the beginning of the twentieth century. As for directions for the actors' movements, Mr. Pitman occasionally provides a second-by-second account of his vision, but in most instances remains silent. These types of direction were likely not necessary, left to the actors themselves.

Exploring Edwin

As my introduction to J. R. Pitman and to manuscript research, Edwin (the Hamlet promptbook) holds a special place in my heart. These images and transcriptions display typical annotations found in all of Penn's Pitman promptbooks.

Mr. Pitman would often accompany his stage directions with his own illustrations, which provide us with a vivid picture of what this production might have looked like.

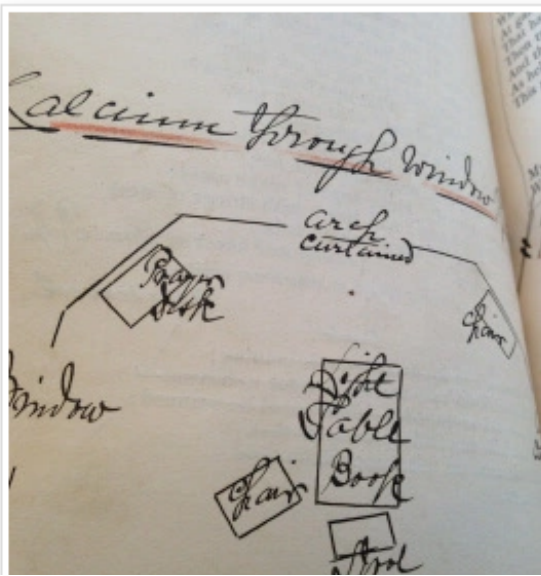
Here is Act One Scene Two when Hamlet is introduced (page 12)

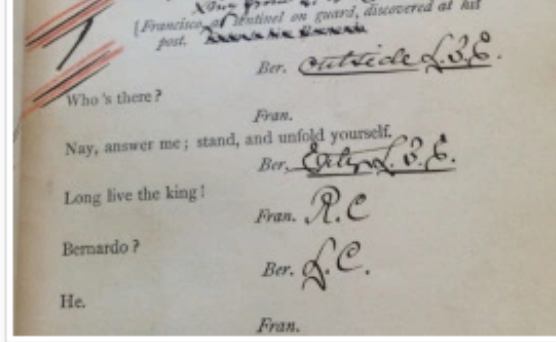


Act Three Scene Two, the play within a play (reverse of page 68)

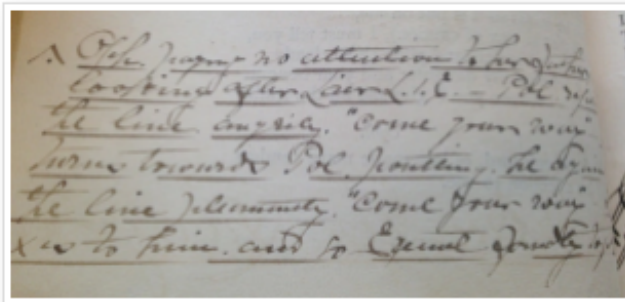


Act Three Scene Four, in the Queen's bedchamber (reverse of page 81)





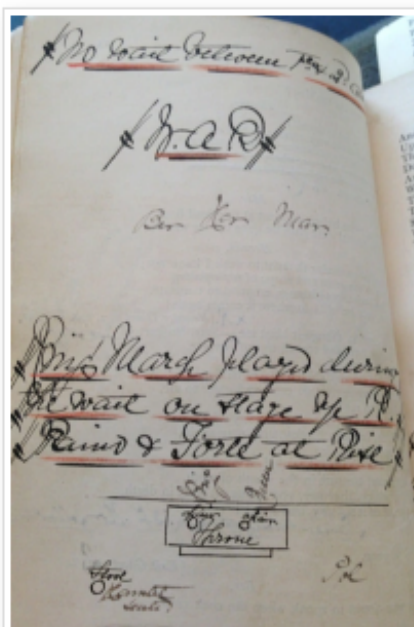
Although there were few long passages of direction, I found this excerpt quite enlightening. In this little snippet from Act One Scene Two, it appears the prompter is portraying Ophelia as an independent and spirited character.

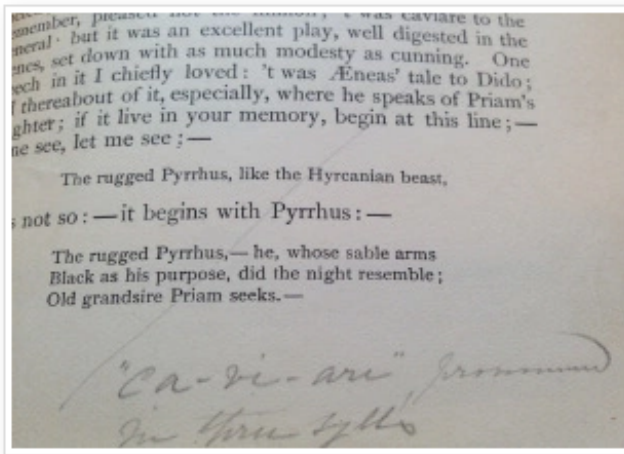


Transcription:

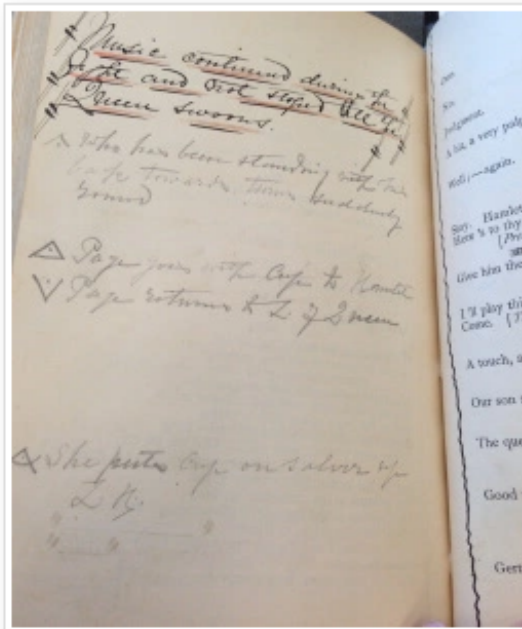
Oph. paying no attention to her father but looking after Laer L.1.6.—Pol repeats the line anyway. "Come your way"—Oph turns towards Pol pouting. he again repeats the line pleasantly. "Come your way." She x to him and to Exeunt proudly to father

None of us is perfect! Here Mr. Pitman misspells piano (reverse of page 13):





Directions for the action of the final scene (reverse of page 121)



Transcription:

Music continued during the fight and not stopped (sp?) till the Queen swoons

who has been standing with his back towards turns suddenly round

Page goes with Cup to Hamlet

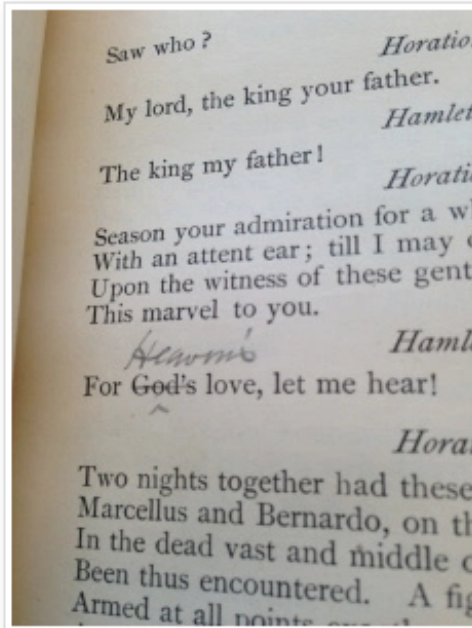
Page returns to L. of Queen

Censorship in the plays

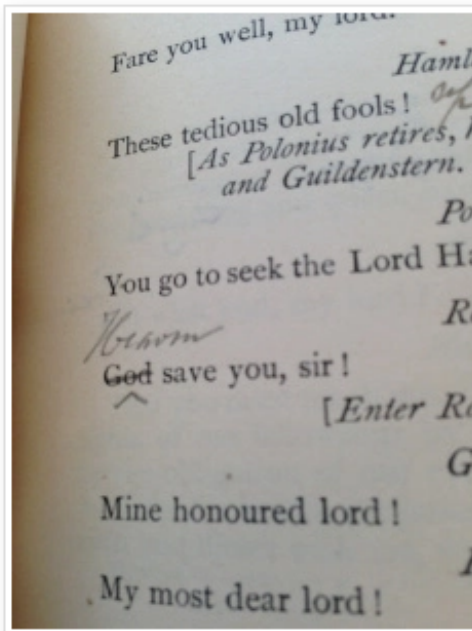
One of the most fascinating aspects of the Pitman promptbooks is the pattern of censorship Pitman applied. It was common for prompters and directors to abbreviate the plays, but throughout *Hamlet* and other promptbooks, J. R. Pitman

crosses out even mild curses. Here are a few examples in Edwin:

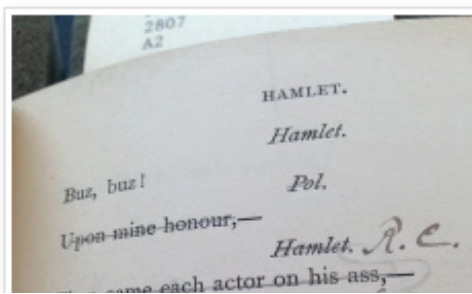
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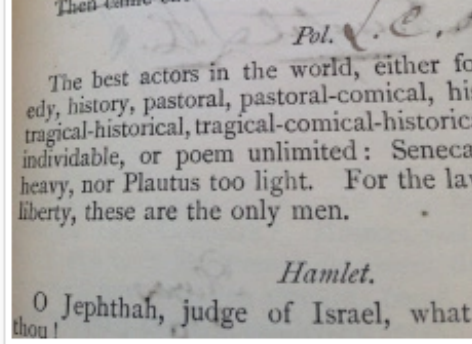


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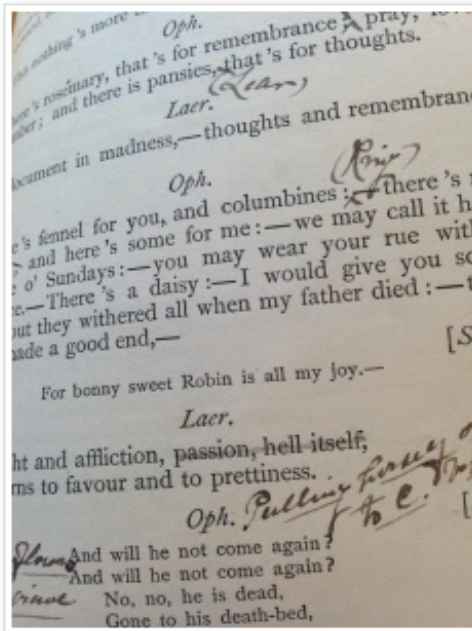


52





98



When I was only examining the *Hamlet* promptbook, I thought this corresponded well with Kate Ryan's description of the Boston Museum.

Very careful attention was given to the selection of plays. The moral feature of the play was largely advertised on the bill, which contained also an offer of one hundred dollars for the best moral drama adapted to the uses of the Museum Stock Company.

Yet at the Castle Square Theatre, there would likely also have been a high interest in censorship. Both theatres were "family friendly" and had large Catholic audiences. In 1894 the *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle* praises Joseph Haworth as the "only great Catholic actor of the American stage today"; Haworth would go on to perform *Hamlet* under the direction of Pitman a year later.

Indeed, in *Hamlet* Pitman eliminates instances where people use the Lord's name in vain, replacing "God" with "Heaven," perhaps reflecting the religious climate of Boston and the sensibilities of his audience.

Even more fascinating is the scattered consistency of Pitman's censorship among

the different promptbooks. Censorship is present in *Hamlet* and in some other promptbooks, but not in others. Any lapse in consistency in Mr. Pitman's writings indicates something of great importance. Eventually, synthesizing information from the different promptbooks allowed me to narrow down their origins.

J. R. Pitman's Theatres

The Boston Museum was one of Boston's premier theatres until it closed in 1903. It appears that the Boston Museum was a "local theatre, a family theatre, and a comedy theatre." Shakespeare performances were relatively infrequent. Edwin Booth performed *Hamlet* at the Boston Museum in November 1884, which was highly praised, although the company only had four rehearsals before the performance. Booth again played *Hamlet* at the Boston Museum in January 1886.

Of Booth's 1884 performance, the *New York Mirror* declares:

"Boston Museum... crowded on Monday evening, and crowded houses have ruled the entire week... Possibly in elocution, [Booth's *Hamlet*] was more mellow than of yore..."

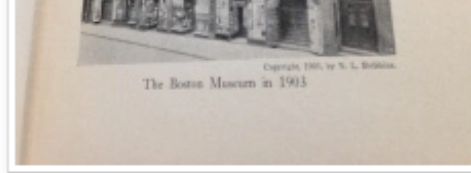
The *Globe* calls it "a renaissance of tragedy—a revival of Shakespeare in a way that bids fair to make him even more dear to every man who wants to see the drama take the place among us it deserves."

I had been hopeful to find out that Edwin reflected a Boston Museum, Edwin Booth production, but this was not to be the case. Instead, I discovered that Pitman's second major theatre, the Castle Square Theatre, is the setting of *Hamlet* and the majority of Penn's Pitman texts. The Castle Square Theatre appears to have been an even more elegant and sophisticated theatre than the Boston Museum—a step up for Pitman. Unfortunately, this theatre was demolished in 1933.

The interior and exterior of the Boston Museum, from *Old Boston Museum Days*:

Pictures of the Boston Museum from *Old Boston Museum Days*:





The interior and exterior of the Castle Square Theatre:

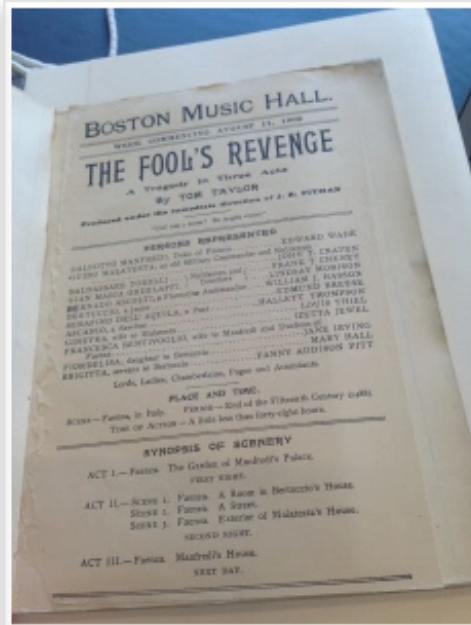
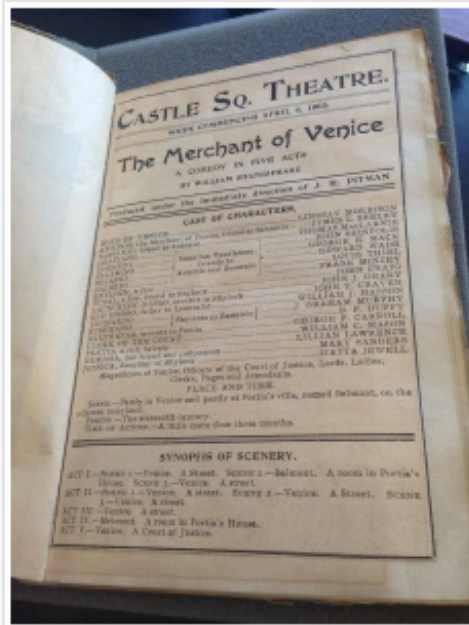
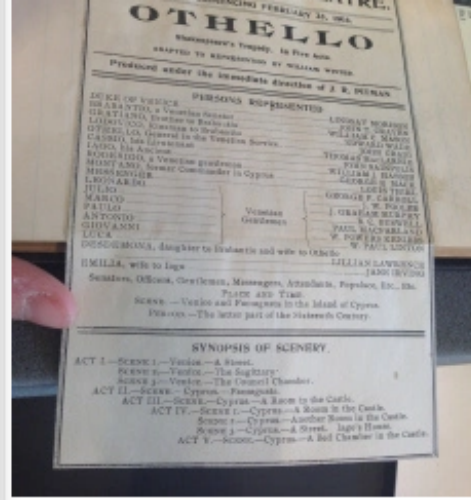
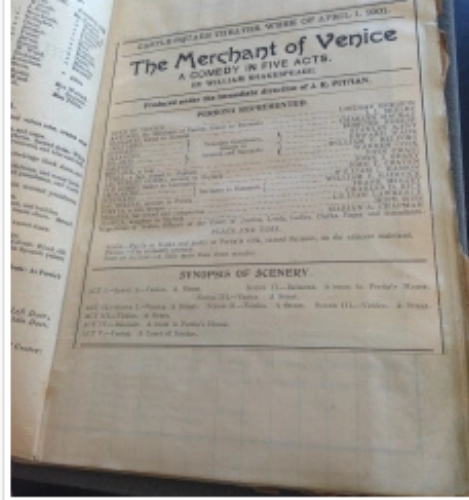


Penn's Promptbooks

Finding a date for the promptbooks independently would be daunting, but the patterns established in the promptbooks help illuminate their respective origins. Certain of the promptbooks have definitive dates because of playbills glued into the front covers or notes by Mr. Pitman himself. (Unfortunately he seems to have kept much better documentation as a young prompter than as an experienced director!) Similarities among undated promptbooks and dated promptbooks have allowed me to hypothesize their contexts, including theatre and time frame.

Playbills





Mr. Pitman helpfully glued playbills inside some of the promptbooks, which give a date and theatre to the performances. I can reasonably assume that the promptbooks were used around the time of the playbills. Out of the eight Pitman promptbooks owned by Penn (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richelieu*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Fool's Revenge*, and a combined *Katharine and*

Petruchio and *The Merchant of Venice*), three have playbills glued in. *Othello* contains a playbill for a 1903 Castle Square Theatre performance. *The Merchant of Venice* contains two Castle Square Theatre playbills, from 1901 and 1903. The combined *Katharine* and *Venice* promptbook also contains these identical two playbills, suggesting Mr. Pitman owned the two promptbooks at the same time. (*Macbeth* also contains a playbill for an unrelated *Richard the Third* 1858 Boston Museum performance.)

Furthermore, Mr. Pitman wrote in dates and theatres for three promptbooks, *The Fool's Revenge* (August 11, 1902, at the Boston Music Hall, another prominent theatre in the city), *Macbeth* (Boston Museum 1870) and *Julius Caesar* (Boston Museum 1878).

Therefore, I can definitively date six out of eight promptbooks:

Othello

Furness Collection. 59 Sh1OB

New York : Printed for William Winter by Francis Hart & Co., 1878

This promptbook was likely used for the Castle Square Theatre February and April performances in 1903.

The Merchant of Venice

Furness Collection. [C59 Sh1 MeP2](#)

Printed for Samuel French

This promptbook was used for at least two performances in 1901 and 1903 at the Castle Square Theatre.

Katharine of Petruchio/The Merchant of Venice

Furness Collection. [C59 Sh1 MeP](#)

New York : Printed for William Winter by Francis Hart & Co., 1881.

This promptbook was used in 1901 and 1903 for *The Merchant of Venice* but may have had other earlier performances at the Boston Museum. I found one possible performance of *Katharine* in 1902 under the name *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Macbeth

Furness Collection. C59 Sh1 MP

Samuel French

This promptbook was used in 1870 at the Boston Museum.

The Fool's Revenge

Furness Collection. 94.91

T. H. French edition, 1876

This promptbook was used at the Boston Music Hall in 1902.

Julius Caesar

Furness Collection. [C59 Sh1 JP](#)

Samuel French

This promptbook was performed at the Boston Museum in 1878.

This information only left me two promptbooks to date—the *Hamlet* and *Richelieu*.

Hamlet

Furness Collection. PR2807.A2 B6

Richelieu

Furness Collection. [C59 L99RP](#)

William Warren 1896

The *Richelieu* promptbook's later print date makes tracing it to the Boston Museum an impossibility, since Mr. Pitman had left the Boston Museum in 1890, so the most likely alternative remains the Castle Square Theatre. I was able to find one record of a Castle Square Theatre *Richelieu* performance, in 1904.

Different editions

It became immediately apparent that there was a pattern in Mr. Pitman's use of promptbook editions. The promptbooks dated to the Boston Museum (*Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*) both were Samuel French editions. (So was *The Merchant of Venice*, but I have an explanation for this anomaly to the pattern I explain below).

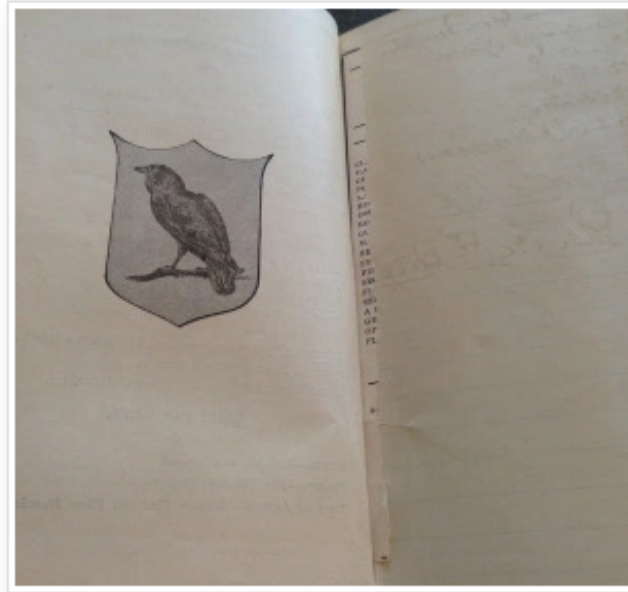
All of the Castle Square Theatre productions were William Winter editions, making it likely that the *Hamlet* was not a Boston Museum promptbook but rather was used for the Castle Square Theatre. These William Winter editions are printed by Edwin Booth, the famed Hamlet actor. Although J. R. Pitman worked with Edwin Booth, who performed as Hamlet at the Boston Museum in 1884 and 1886, all evidence suggests he was linked to Penn's promptbook in printed name only.

Hamlet was performed at the Castle Square Theatre in December and April of 1902. A 1901 advertisement in the *Cambridge Tribune* for *The Merchant of Venice* actually mentions the Edwin Booth edition of the play as a selling point, indicating the importance of the Booth edition during that time frame:

Mr. J. R. Pitman, the thoroughly competent and conscientious stage director at the Castle Square theatre, will use the Edwin Booth version of the play in the coming production, and great care will be taken to ensure accuracy in the scenic and costume effects.

All evidence indicates a Castle Square Theatre production of *Hamlet*, likely in 1903, although there were two other Castle Square Theatre productions in 1895 and 1896.

Only a few weeks ago I realized that a torn piece of paper in Pitman's *Hamlet* reveals the bordering of a playbill—the same design used in the Castle Square Theatre playbills. In an exciting way as any, my theory was confirmed.



Censorship

I have already noted the extensive censorship within the *Hamlet* promptbook. Yet Mr. Pitman, so methodical with his stage directions, symbols, lists and his wording, only continues this pattern of censorship in certain of the promptbooks: *Othello*, *The Fool's Revenge*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The *Venice/Katharine* copy, *Macbeth*, *Richelieu*, and *Julius Caesar* contain no instances of censorship.

The pattern seems to be that only the William Winter/Edwin Booth promptbooks, used for the Castle Square Theatre productions, were censored. However, there are a few exceptions. The *Venice/Katharine* promptbook is very sparsely written in and looks barely used, explaining a lack of censorship. Why *Richelieu* is not censored remains a mystery if it was performed at the Castle Square Theatre, as I suspect.

The prevalence of censorship in the Castle Square Theatre promptbooks reveals something quite interesting about this theatre—the insistence on absolute Christian propriety suggests that this theatre went to every length possible to avoid offending the devout. It is not only the religious Boston audience that explains it, because promptbooks for the Boston Museum do not insist on censorship. Likely the censorship results from either the special character of Castle Square Theatre playgoers, or the insistence of the management. I do know from *Six Years of Drama at the Castle Square Theatre* that there were an “exceptional number of women and children” who came to the plays; perhaps that has something to do with it.

Moonlight: a key word

J. R. Pitman employed many special effects to engage his audience—calcium powder during ghost scenes (seen in almost all of the promptbooks, although surprisingly not *Macbeth*), colored footlights to alter the mood of a scene, music and props. Yet only in later Castle Theatre plays does Mr. Pitman use “moonlight,” referring to a lighting system that simulates the light of the moon. “Moonlight” appears in *Othello*, *Venice/Katharine*, *Richelieu* and *The Merchant of Venice*. “Moonlight” never appears in *Hamlet*, although this promptbook represents another Castle Square Theatre production.

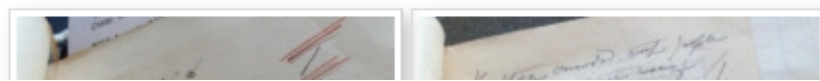
The Castle Square Theatre was assuredly more technically advanced than the Boston Museum, containing “every appliance in the theatrical world” according to William Harvey Birkmire in *The Planning and Construction of American Theatres*. The theatre’s “switchboard which controls the light effects is a marvelous piece of mechanism.”

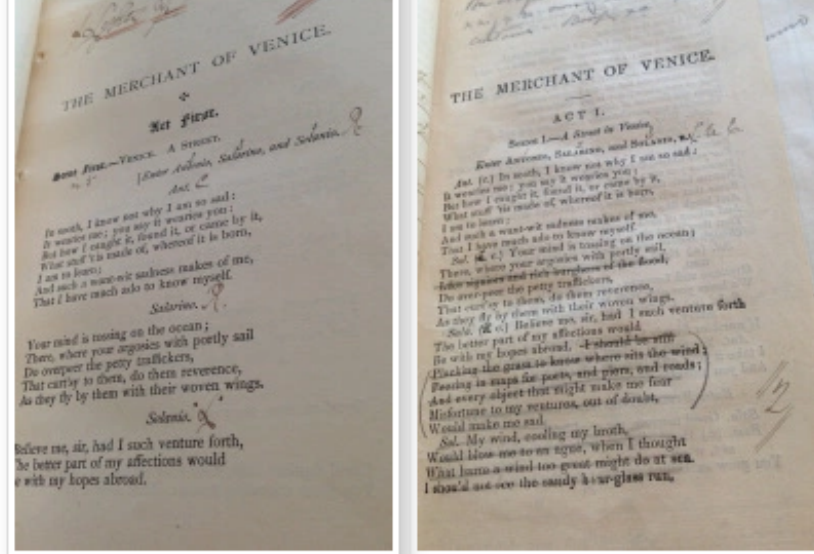
The Merchant of Venice: an interesting case

I had figured out the origins of every promptbook, but *The Merchant of Venice* was an interesting case. It contains playbills from 1901 and 1903, suggesting it was used in Castle Square Theatre productions, but it includes multiple crossings-out, almost as if it had been used in multiple productions. There is fastidious censorship, mirroring the other Castle Square Theatre productions, and it also uses moonlight a few times. Everything corresponds with use at the Castle Square Theatre. However, it is a Samuel French edition, which would make it appear to be a Boston Museum promptbook, unless J. R. Pitman decided to use a different edition for some reason. Things didn’t make sense.

I eventually realized that all of the markings that correspond to the Castle Square Theatre are in pencil, while many of the pen markings have been crossed out and altered. Mr. Pitman censors words in pencil, and adds on many stage directions while changing others. The pencil stage directions happen to correspond perfectly to the markings in the other *Merchant* attached to *Katharine*. Furthermore, Mr. Pitman has crossed out many passages in the first *Venice* that were cut out of the more abridged *Venice/Katharine*. These edits are all in pencil, suggesting he kept these passages in for the earlier Boston Museum production.

I hypothesize that Mr. Pitman used this copy at the Boston Museum, then simply recycled the promptbook for much later productions at the Castle Square Theatre. This explains the alterations to stage directions and to the disconnect between the edition and the playbills. In fact, the *Merchant* promptbook presents a fascinating study of how Mr. Pitman altered his productions over time.





On the right I have the newer *Venice/Katharine* copy; on the left, the older *Venice*. Notice the edits that make these passages identical.

Conclusion

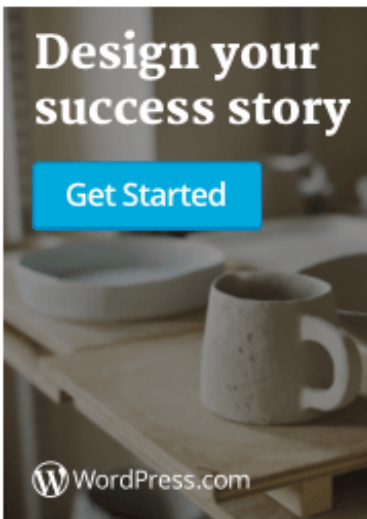
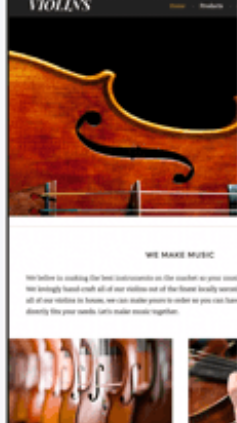
There is still much work to be done on the Pitman texts, and much more to be learned about Pitman himself. My knowledge of Pitman productions is very much incomplete, and there may be more Pitman manuscripts lying in rare materials libraries all across the East Coast. The question of how Penn acquired these materials remains an interesting one.

I am incredibly fortunate to have had the chance to work with these remarkable texts and to meet Mr. Pitman. It has been a phenomenal introduction to manuscript research. I will continue to pursue any leads I can find to learn more about J. R. Pitman's worthy life.

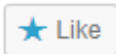
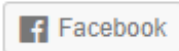


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