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Cooke's *Hamlet* in Performance, 1785

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ACTOR George Frederick Cooke always attracted attention. Looking back on the English theatre, Lord Byron would muse, "Of Actors, Cooke was the most natural." Leigh Hunt, somewhat dismayed by Cooke's performances of high-energy villainy, declared, "Mr. Cooke is the Machiavel of the modern stage." A well-known and controversial figure, Cooke was not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be. He was meant to be Richard III, Shylock, and Iago, and he triumphed professionally in these roles, among many others, for some thirty-five years in England and some eighteen months in America until his sudden death in New York in 1812. Cooke bequeathed memories of astonishing performances (onstage and off) to his audiences, inspiring a popular two-volume biography first published a year after his death.¹ It was even rumored, years later, that Yorick's skull on the Park Theatre stage in New York was in fact Cooke's skull.² For students of more documentary theatre history, however, Cooke also left behind a significant document related to one of his least successful roles:

¹ See William Dunlap, *The Life of George Frederick Cooke*, 2nd ed. (1815, rpt; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972). Byron's comment appeared in "Detached Thoughts" (15 October 1821), *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1904) 5:437. Leigh Hunt's observation forms the first sentence in his essay on Cooke in *Dramatic Essays by Leigh Hunt*, ed. William Archer and Robert W. Lowe (London: Walter Scott, 1894) 102.

² See Don B. Wilmeth, "The Posthumous Career of George Frederick Cooke," *Theatre Notebook* 24.1 (Winter 1969-70): 68-74. Surprisingly, Cooke's physician, Dr. John W. Francis (who also performed the autopsy) *did* lend Cooke's skull to the Park Theatre on one occasion and also used the skull in a lecture on phrenology. See John W. Francis, *Old New York* (1865, rpt; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971) 292-93.

Hamlet. Discovered in the late 1950s, Cooke's rehearsal copy of *Hamlet* represents one of the earliest of all *Hamlet* promptbooks, and yet it remains virtually unknown both in relation to Shakespearean theatre history and in relation to Cooke's place within it.

In 1960 Muriel St. Clare Byrne reported in *Theatre Notebook* on "The Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book in an English Library," describing George Frederick Cooke's rehearsal copy for performance in Chester, 1785—personally inscribed by the famous actor with many manuscript emendations—held in the collection of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.³ The discovery caused barely a ripple. Twenty years later in 1980, two full-length biographies of Cooke appeared: one in England by Arnold Hare who uncritically observed, "Miss Byrne's study of the prompt book in *Theatre Notebook* is so detailed that little needs to be added here," but added significantly that Cooke's notations contain "clear evidence of the working of an intelligent and original mind, content to take nothing for granted, and concerned to make action emerge from, and be relevant to, the text."⁴ Cooke's American biographer, Don Wilmeth, noted the significance of Cooke's promptbook as one of the earliest extant of all *Hamlet* promptbooks, adding "it is discussed, although not so fully as one might wish, by M. St. Clare Byrne."⁵ In fact since Byrne's article the only critical mention of Cooke's text remains Edward A. Langhans's 1983 reference, wherein he drew attention to "the remarkable notes on stage movement, business, and characterization" in Cooke's promptbook; quoted and photographically reproduced Cooke's manuscript notes involving Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus, and the Ghost; and commented wistfully: "Would that we could find more promptbooks like this one."⁶

Rather than look for more promptbooks, I plan to look closely at this particular one, to engage critically with Cooke's rehearsal text of *Hamlet* by historicizing, contextualizing, and interpreting

³ Muriel St. Clare Byrne, "The Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book in an English Library," *Theatre Notebook* 15.1 (Autumn 1960): 21–31.

⁴ Arnold Hare, *George Frederick Cooke: The Actor and the Man* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1980) 42.

⁵ Don B. Wilmeth, *George Frederick Cooke: Machiavel of the Stage* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980) 306, n.64.

⁶ Edward A. Langhans, "Eighteenth-Century Promptbooks and Staging Practices," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 12 (1983): 154.

Cooke's meanings, emphases, and intentions in the theatre. Marvin Rosenberg's massively detailed and descriptive *Masks of Hamlet* (1992) will be informative for my readings of character and action in relation to Cooke.⁷ In the interpretive readings that follow, I plan to extend Byrne's mainly descriptive and quantitative findings by bringing biographical, critical, and historical material to bear on Cooke's realization of *Hamlet* in performance. Cooke's personalized document—he lists his own name beside Hamlet on the cast list, assigning the part “26 Lengths” (one “length” = forty-two lines)—represents a virtual snapshot of Hamlet on the stage and in action at the end of the eighteenth century.

After Garrick, Cooke—at least that's the way early commentators such as Byron, Hunt, and Hazlitt saw it. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, however, is at pains to point out that Cooke, in 1785, was in the service of his acting company and especially of Joseph Austin who had acted in London with Garrick some twenty-five to thirty years before. At the outset of her article Byrne states, “it was presumably the company's prompt book, as prepared by Austin for their repertoire, with the name-part as played by himself, that Cooke was copying when he prepared the text for his own use.”⁸ That Cooke merely copied with corporate approval, however, is a rather large assumption concerning this actor at the age of twenty-nine, notoriously individualistic, playing the lead roles, and drawing the highest salary to date for an actor within a professional provincial company. Cooke's interleaved little acting edition of 1782 is—as stated on the title page—“Marked with the Variations in the Manager's Book at the Theatre-Royal in Drury Lane.” Significantly, however, Cooke defaced the head note at the beginning of the text—

☛ The Reader is desired to observe, that the Passages omitted in the Representation at the Theatre are here preserved, and marked with inverted Commas

⁷ Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1992). I wish also to acknowledge two theoretical texts that inform my considerations throughout: Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*, trans. Loren Kruger (London: Routledge, 1992); and Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁸ Byrne, “Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book” 24.

—vigorously hatching out the printed words, to leave only the pointing finger unmarred. The point? Individuality—as seen in his name, proudly inscribed on the title page: “George Cooke Christmas Eve (Friday) 1789 Sheffield.” But, by marring the text in this way, Cooke also asserted a deeply theatrical truth about printed play texts, a sense that printed texts refuse the impermanence of performance. The innovation and experience of performance gets penciled in and scribbled along the margins. And Cooke provides such scribblings throughout his rehearsal copy of *Hamlet*.

Examining the book, we shall see that the accepted managerial cuts of the 1780s are there but that Cooke often works against them in terms of word choice, emphasis, and pacing as well as within physical action and visual realization. Byrne almost admits as much but remains altogether too tentative in her article, stating that “the longer the book is studied the more the impression grows that, although we must probably credit Austin with the main design and much of the detail, nevertheless the rising young actor’s vigorous intellect and individual approach were also asserting themselves successfully at this particular moment when he was very conscious of his own rapidly developing powers and of having taken an important step forwards.”⁹ Byrne was more interested in enumerating and categorizing. My argument—in line with the biographical commentary of Wilmeth, Hare, Hazlitt, Byron, Dunlap, and others—emphasizes the second half of Byrne’s statement about Cooke’s independence, to interpret his *Hamlet* critically and to assert his inauguration in the 1780s as romantic, post-Garrick virtuoso on the professional stage.

Byrne almost says as much: “How far Cooke may have imposed his own moves and business for *Hamlet* upon the Austin prompt book we cannot know, but his comment on the playing of the end of the Nunnery scene, suggests that this interpretation was individual.”¹⁰ But this is *not* “the Austin” promptbook. It is Cooke’s, bearing his signature, handwriting, and general imprint throughout. As we shall see, so does the play itself onstage. In fact, Cooke’s first biographer, the contemporary American impresario William Dunlap, claims that Cooke imposed himself on everything he undertook. Through bold emphases in diction and swift transitions of

⁹ “Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book” 24.

¹⁰ “Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book” 27.

meaning, Cooke deliberately broke the rhythmic declamatory style then prevalent on the professional stage. The Nunnery scene will be considered in detail later, but for now let us focus on the early exchanges between Hamlet and the Ghost and Cooke's careful notes for their realization in the theatre.

The interleaved blank at page 18 contains Cooke's notation to begin scene four. Atmosphere meets action as Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus move downstage. Cooke writes: "The Stage darkened—*Hamlet* enters from the Top, *Horatio* on his R.H. *Marcellus* on L.H.—They speak as they come down." Language moves with action following Hamlet's entry line: "The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold."¹¹ At line 7, the printed stage direction concerning Claudius's wassail, "*Noise of trumpets within*" is crossed out, keyed # and emended in Cooke's handwriting on the interleaved page as follows: "#Martial Music heard at a distance. afterwards the great Dog appears and Barks and Barks at last runs off[f] the stag[e]."¹² Animals onstage are of course notoriously unpredictable. But Cooke clearly hoped for a significant realistic effect about midnight mystery, chill deprivation and ghostly strangeness, especially in relation to the fireside cheer inside at Claudius's revel. Byrne's consideration of dogs in the company's standard contract barks up the wrong stage in this instance. However, Rosenberg mentions the "sounds of night, of storm, of strangeness" as he references dogs in relation to Jean-Louis Barrault's twentieth-century realization of the scene: "Thus the Barrault promptbook: 'The wind blows stronger and stronger, reaching its peak One hears the stormy sea, the waves, and barking dogs.'"¹³ Here and throughout, one wonders what Cooke might have done with twentieth-century sound effects. Cooke clearly intends to accentuate effects of his own, subtly

¹¹ *Hamlet* (London, 1782) 18. Whenever I quote from Cooke's rehearsal copy I silently emend the use of long s; hereafter, I will cite pages parenthetically within the text. Whenever I cite act, scene, and line numbers, I am quoting from the Arden edition of *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982).

¹² The emended passage is faint and even crossed through with pencil. I quote it from Edward A. Langhans's careful description of Cooke's *Hamlet* promptbook in *Eighteenth Century British and Irish Promptbooks: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987) 152, where he cites the passage as an example of Cooke's interleaf notes. Byrne misquotes thus: "Barks and Barks at back scene of stage"; see "Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book" 26.

¹³ *Masks of Hamlet* 311.

emending "bray out" to "proclaim", thus allowing Hamlet to spit out his distaste for Claudius's revelry: "The kettle-drum, and trumpet; thus proclaim / The triumph of his pledge" (18). Such revelry is, of course, "More honour'd in the breach, than the observance" and Cooke ends the speech at precisely this point with Horatio's abrupt interjection and entrance of the Ghost.

As in the previous scene, Cooke's performance notes rigorously accentuate pacing and emphasis in a lengthy handwritten notation:

When the Ghost appears *Hamlet* starts,—a short pause—speaks the first line—a longer pause—At the word "father:"—pause—& during the whole Scene, never takes his eye off the Ghost. (19)

Such notes relate interior action for exterior purpose, as Rosenberg observes, "Hamlet's response is our main touchstone: we experience with him. He must first of all, for us, *see a ghost*."¹⁴ Cooke's eye-popping concentration focuses the attention of everyone in the theatre at this moment, as Garrick was said to do. According to the contemporary *St. James's Chronicle*: "No actor ever *saw* a ghost like Garrick."¹⁵ But the notorious "fright-wig" of Garrick—allegedly designed by the wigmaker Perkins to allow the great actor's hair actually to stand on end—has no place in Cooke's more internalized conception.¹⁶ Instead, rhetorical pacing does the work, with the full stop of emotional emphasis at "father." Subsequent Hamlets doffed (or recklessly lost) their hat and kneeled at this point, just as Garrick had, but Cooke indicates no such business. To begin Hamlet's desperate plea, he emends the sentence-ending "royal Dane" (1.4.45) to an imperative: "Loyal Dane oh! answer me" (19). The actions are just as desperate. Cooke notes specifically the gestures of the Ghost who physically waves four separate times "With an Action of earnest entreaty" (19) that moti-

¹⁴ *Masks of Hamlet* 292.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Masks of Hamlet* 292.

¹⁶ On Garrick's fright-wig, see Kalman A. Burnim, *David Garrick: Director* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1961) 160–61. On Garrick and eighteenth-century theatre, see George Winchester Stone, Jr. and George M. Kahrl, *David Garrick: A Critical Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1979).

vates Hamlet further. Cooke cuts "at a pin's fee" to express directly, "Why, what should be the fear? / I value not my life" (19), and his handwritten description again builds the blocking of the scene in direct relation to Horatio and Marcellus: "Begins to struggle, and increases it, until he breaks from them" (20). Breaking free is emphasized in Cooke's note as "A Violent exertion" (20), keyed to the frustrated restraint of his next line "By heav'n, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me" (20)—clearly a violent threat that Kemble, Cooke's contemporary, saw fit to cut in his rather more austere version of Hamlet.¹⁷ Focus for Cooke, at this point, remains on the violence and danger of the title character, noting: "*Hor. & Mar.* following with the necessary attention" (20). Vigorous kinetic movement builds to the crisis of the next scene, set up by Cooke's longhand note: "Stage still dark" (20).

From within the darkened stage, the Ghost describes the terrible details of his murder. This is a scene in which Hamlet must listen, concentrate, and absorb, allowing emotion to build gradually as impelled by the power of the Ghost and the dreadful information it unfolds. The Ghost's voice itself must register a tone of command, imprecation, and pathos—a difficult combination, literally and figuratively, as observed by Rosenberg: "The Ghost's voice must have its distinctive quality: must differ from Claudius', though (especially when the same actor doubles) it may have a sibling quality; be not much older; be instinct with passion."¹⁸ And yet A.C. Sprague in his book on stage action in Shakespeare quotes from an 1807 handbook on acting that specifies as follows: "The speech of the ghost is to be spoken without action, very low and solemn."¹⁹ At this point, the emotional register seems very broad indeed. Cooke, however, clarifies his sense of the Ghost's delivery by deleting the printed direction "*Ghost beneath*", and penning the following observation at the imperative line "Swear":

¹⁷ *Masks of Hamlet* 307.

¹⁸ *Masks of Hamlet* 315.

¹⁹ Arthur Colby Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Actors: The Stage Business in his Plays 1660–1905* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) 142.

The Ghost's Voice should be distinctly heard, but so contrived, as to sound neither above nor below the persons on the Stage—It is ludicrous & absurd to imagine, because he generally descends through a trap door, he should speak as if pent up in the Earth. Going off at the Entrance is much to be preferred (24).

Cooke takes these actions personally and is insistent on the effects he wishes to create. At the Ghost's exit phrase "remember me" (22), the printed text has "[*Sinks.*]" But Cooke significantly adds "L.H.," suggesting that this production—in line with the above notation—eschews the contemporary trapwork that had become predictable and sometimes merrily awkward.²⁰

Instead, as insisted upon by Cooke, the Ghost's reiterated "Swear" is delivered "neither above nor below" with Hamlet making no mention of "this fellow in the cellaridge" (the line is crossed out) nor any reference whatever to subterranean possibilities. At the famous lines (1.5.174–75), Cooke emends "your" to "our" as in the First Folio to deliver: "There are more things in heav'n and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (24) suggesting the mutually enlightened nature of the moment and leading to the collective oath of the trio at the final desperate, insistent imperative: "Swear." At this point, Cooke writes: "*Hamlet* holds his Sword—*Hor. & Mar.* kneel, lay their Right Hands on it & bend their Heads in token of assent" (25). The scene ends powerfully with their pledge combined with Hamlet's overwhelming realization—for him, personal and political—that

The time is out of joint; oh, cursed spight!
That ever I was born to set it right!

Cooke purposefully isolates the couplet and the character with his added notation: "The two last lines not directed to his Companions." Hamlet then exits alone. Again, Cooke prescribes the exit action at stage left: "*Ham.* 1st—*Hor. & Mar.* together" (25). Emphasis is clearly placed on Hamlet as hero and on Cooke as star.

²⁰ In this regard, see Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Actors* 142–43.

Hamlet's next entrance makes good use again of visual focus within theatrical space. The printed direction, "Enter *Hamlet* reading" (33) is crossed out and transferred three lines later at Polonius's "I'll board him presently." Here Cooke intervenes with a handwritten direction: "Enter 1 E. L.H. Hair disshevelled—reading. (The King & Queen quite off)." Cooke's emphasis in the blocking focuses all eyes in the house on him as Hamlet. As noted, Claudius and Gertrude are to be well offstage right before Hamlet enters from the left. Ophelia has described his "transformation," and now the audience witnesses it in action. Hamlet's clipped, cynical, and ridiculous repartee with Polonius further signals his antic incongruity. "Hair disshevelled" indicates the neglect and impropriety that Ophelia earlier described. Rosenberg lists many other "improprieties" that have been performed:

A jester's cap and bells. Bare feet. In his shirt, or with no shirt at all. In women's clothes. Pyjamas. Ragged. Trouserless. Garters dangling. Face smeared. Crawls. Barks. Clucks like a hen. Tip-toes. Throws himself into angular poses. Speaks in a silly voice. Does a silly walk. Puts a coin in his eye, and pretends it is a monocle. Wears a crown of twigs.²¹

But all this business is for a more visual age. Cooke probably relied on the quips in the script which are clear and untouched throughout this exchange with Polonius: "fishmonger," "maggots in a dead dog," "words, words, words." Here, Kemble was first to tear a few pages out of the book and offer them to Polonius.²² Cooke's Hamlet swells to the rhetorical emphasis of "for yourself, Sir, shall be as old as I am, if like a crab, you could go backward" (34), where Cooke inserts "X To R.H.," suggesting an abrupt backing away or an equally abrupt about-face and movement to stage right. Cutting a few of Polonius's lines to "I humbly take my leave," Cooke's response signals sarcasm coupled with distress through repetition: "You cannot, Sir, take from me any thing that I will more willingly part withal, except my life, except my life" (34). By deleting the

²¹ Rosenberg, *Masks of Hamlet* 390.

²² See Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Actors* 147.

third "except my life" Cooke attains special rhetorical emphasis, lingering for a moment in wondrous reflection or as described by Rosenberg: "The first *except my life* is often an extension of the sardonic joke; then Hamlet hears what he is saying, and more soberly reiterates it."²³ In Cooke's case, he emphatically repeats it one time. His sober repetition changes to impatient disgust at "These tedious old fools!" where Cooke again annotates possible actions: "Turn up the Stage, throwing the Book away, or putting it in his pocket" (34). Such improvisational possibilities suggest some freedom in interpretation. Cooke effectively frees his intentions by indicating theatrical alternatives in his realization of Hamlet.

Even as he further isolates himself through his "antic disposition," Cooke's Hamlet finds himself—literally and figuratively—in the middle of action. At greeting his "excellent good friends" Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Cooke's edition spells "Rosencraus" as in the 2nd Quarto), Cooke inserts "X to Middle" (34). In response to Guildenstern's nervous "My lord, we were sent for," Hamlet again crosses confidently "to Middle" (36) while delivering the line "I will tell you why." Then, when Polonius enters, Hamlet gets particularly intimate. At "Hark you, Guildenstern; and Rosencraus" Cooke literally inserts himself in the action through specific handwritten detail, "Passes between them" (38). Cooke's insistent blocking puts Hamlet always in between the two, suggesting a duplicitous intimacy. Reporting in *The Morning Chronicle* (14 March 1814), Hazlitt especially praised Kean's interpretation at this point: "The manner of his taking Guildenstern and Rosencrantz under each arm, under pretence of communicating his secret to them, when he only means to trifle with them, had the finest effect."²⁴ Here, as in much else, Kean may well have taken his performance style from Cooke. Note also the particular intimacy of Hamlet's prevaricating "You say right, Sir: on Monday morning; 'twas then, indeed"(38). Here Cooke adds another of his possible gestures: "Addressed particularly to *Rosencraus*, laying his hand on his shoulder, or some such familiar manner using" (38). This patronizing intimacy gets transferred to Polonius, as Hamlet insists "Am I not I'the right, Old Jephtha?" and Cooke again inserts, "Clapping *Polonius*

²³ Rosenberg, *Masks of Hamlet* 404.

²⁴ Quoted from *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. A.R. Waller and Arnold Glover, 12 vols. (London: Dent, 1903) 8:188.

on the Shoulder" (39). In Act 3, scene 2, Cooke details the processional entrance of the King and Queen to hear the play, stipulating precisely as follows: "N.B. The Players Enter & Exeunt 1E.L.H. While the Court are placing themselves, *Hamlet* does not seem to observe them" (50). Moreover, to accentuate his inquiring about Polonius onstage at the university, Cooke adds the note: "Beckons *Pol.* & brings him down to the Front, on his right, a small distance from L.H.D" (50). Cooke's Hamlet reaches out to touch, prevaricate, physically interact, and emotionally connect with both his onstage performers and his audience. His carefully descriptive annotations prescribe onstage location at the same time as they suggest interactive possibilities, registering his gestures as emotional, communicative information.

As with all things physical onstage, timing is of the utmost importance. Cooke writes clear instructions for himself in relation to the Player when Polonius take his exit. Just prior to "Dost thou hear me, old friend", Cooke writes: "The Players follow Polonius:—He, who spoke, last—When *Hamlet* says "Dost thou hear, &tc." he turns, bows, & waits—Exeunt the rest" (41). Then, immediately following, Cooke inserts in relation to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "Waits on them to the Entrance" marked "1E.R.H." in the margin which is opposite side to the exit of Polonius and the others. Through these detailed and physically prescriptive movements, Cooke clears the stage for Hamlet's confidential instructions to the Player regarding "a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines" (42). Again, focus rivets crisply upon Hamlet as opposed to stage business with the variously incompetent eavesdropping duo of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Such focus allows Cooke to take centre stage at the Player's exit. His ensuing speech beginning "Oh, what a wretch and peasant slave am I" (42) undergoes penned emendations that emphasize immediate comprehension. Ignoring folio and quarto readings, "all his visage warm'd/wann'd" (F/Q) becomes for Cooke "all his visage chang'd" (42). Seven lines later, "cue" gets replaced by "ground" for positional rhyme in the next line with "drown'd," and the line following gets bulleted emphasis by marking out the inverted commas that signal a standard cut in this period. In fact the whole passage from "Yet I, / A Dull and muddy-mettled rascal" to "for it cannot be" (2.2.561–572), usually cut onstage at this time gets boxed in ink but significantly *not* crossed out, perhaps providing the added length to make up the 26 noted at the beginning for

Hamlet's part, and swelling to the impassioned climax of "Must like a drab, unpack my heart with words, / And fall a scolding!—Oh!—Oh!" (43). Here, Cooke eschews folio and quarto readings as well as the eighteenth-century editorial propositions of Capell, Rowe, and Johnson to assert his own individualized emphasis and passion.

Of the "Nunnery" scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, Byrne concedes that Cooke's commentary near the end "suggests that this interpretation was individual."²⁵ Rosenberg comments on the emotional complexity of the scene: "Generally, Hamlet either climbs to a peak of anger or anguish, and leaves Ophelia in fury, or the loving subtext insists, and some tenderness and anguish color his departure."²⁶ Cooke handles both with physical timing and a curious sense of emphatic repetition. At "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool no where but *in his own house*" (Cooke's penned emphasis), Cooke inserts: "Goes hastily towards L.H.D.—stops, & looks at *Ophelia*" (47). Then, "Farewel," with Cooke's direction, "Exit L.H.D.," only to return immediately upon Ophelia's next line with the tirade beginning "If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry" (3.1.136–7). Cooke asserts movement, "blocking in" exits and entrances that go beyond individuated interpretation to suggest interanimating process. His Hamlet is kinetically alive and unpredictable, moving in and out and circling in ways that keep both Ophelia and the audience off balance. Moreover, his handwritten marginal notes to himself indicate that his movements are self-willed and insistent.

Cooke's Hamlet, however, also takes Ophelia into consideration. At the next "Farewel," Cooke writes: "retires a little L.H. stops, looks at Ophelia, goes & and takes her hand before he proceeds with his speech" (47). This quiet gesture of hand-holding receives emphasis a line later where Cooke writes the following instruction to himself: "Throws her hand gently from him, & retires a little" (47). Only then, with an inserted dash in ink suggesting pause, does he allow himself to deliver the imperative, "To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewel" after which in longhand: "—Farewell—Farewell. Exit L.H.D." Cooke repeats this intrusively

²⁵ Byrne, "Earliest *Hamlet* Prompt Book" 27.

²⁶ Rosenberg, *Masks of Hamlet* 536

particular emphasis at the end of Hamlet's next beat: "To a nun-ery, go" by penning the following insertion: "—go—go—go" (47). In both instances, the repetition takes time, signals emphasis, and suggests special emotional effect—perhaps even eliciting spontaneous applause or scoring a "hit" as Hazlitt termed it.²⁷

Cooke even adds an extra-theatrical reminder here, directed to the actress at her exit: "Ophelia must remember to give Hamlet a little time in this scene" (47). Hamlet, however, is Cooke just as certainly as Cooke is Hamlet. Having moved briskly downstage left a number of times in this scene, Cooke has even exited only to return with renewed pathos. He seems to be trying something different, even innovative, and he provides a note to remind his female playing partner of the time necessary to effect his unusual interpretation. His sympathetic pauses and gentle physical touch seem to differentiate Cooke's Hamlet from the harsh and hateful antics of Garrick and Kemble to anticipate the loving prince created later by Kean. As *The Examiner* observed for 20 March 1813: "Actors usually think it necessary to become all at once stark, staring mad, to stamp and rave and almost fight with Ophelia. Not so Mr. KEAN: his Hamlet, like Shakespeare's, was a being preternaturally raised by the solemnity of the contemplation in which he had indulged."²⁸ Some thirty years previously, Cooke laid down the blocking for this physical realization of the scene.

Clearly self-conscious about performance in action, Cooke even makes critical comment keyed to the desired effect of this production of *Hamlet*. Significantly, he himself gets involved in metadramatic terms as he intervenes concerning the play within the play. At the prologue to "The Mousetrap," he writes: "The Lines should be spoken seriously, but not with that affected gesture and Pomp too commonly used" (52). As well, he specifies the nature of the mimed action of Lucianus murdering the Player King: "When Luc. pours the poison into the King's Ear, he should retire with marks of dread & perturbation, not in the ridiculous manner generally used" (55). Cooke wants this production to be set apart from the usual run. In fact, and somewhat unusually for the time, Cooke insists on theatrical credibility even in catching "the conscience of

²⁷ See James Mulvihill, "William Hazlitt on Dramatic Text and Performance," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 41 (2001): 703.

²⁸ Quoted in Rosenberg, *Masks of Hamlet* 491.

the King" (2.2.601). Rosenberg steps back to visualize the scene along the same lines as Cooke does:

Hamlet counts on a brilliantly acted drama to reach the King's conscience, moving him to signs of guilt; assuming Hamlet has any taste at all, these actors—the best—are surely not meant to make a mockery of Hamlet's strategy. The acting is to be so superlative, so touching, that no conscience could resist.... I have seen the players here create an emotionally charged moment that made us care as much as it does Claudius. Here again, I believe Shakespeare counted on the mystery of the theatre: that splendidly acted moments, in any viable language and style, entrance spectators.²⁹

Cooke expands theatrical effect visually and esthetically to engage and entrance his particular audience. In doing so he also enthusiastically inflates his details by crossing out "thousand pounds" and assuring Horatio: "I'll take the ghost's word for a million!" (55).

Cooke also directs the attentions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with Hamlet's notorious observations about playing on the recorder. The text reads: "*Enter Horatio with a recorder*" (57), and Cooke provides the following commentary: "*Hor.* Presents the Instrument, bows, & goes off R.H.D.—When *Ham.* advances towards *Hor. Guil. & Ros.* follow him close, when he turns, they retire a little, with marks of profound respect" (57). Rosenberg focuses directly on Cooke's intentions at this point, noting "old comic business" and identifying the effect in visually slapstick terms: "Cooke suddenly stopped and the surprised shadows stumbled back."³⁰ Physical comedy asserts itself here as it does when Hamlet challenges the wilting sycophants, "do you think that I am easier to be play'd on than a pipe?" and Cooke scribbles in the casual direction: "Throwing it away" (57). Visually, and literally he gives the recorder the same "off hand" treatment that he gave the book upon which he read all those "Words, words, words" (2.2.192).

²⁹ Rosenberg, *Masks of Hamlet* 580–81.

³⁰ *Masks of Hamlet* 615.

The thing that Cooke never “throws away” is physical effect. When Hamlet enters in Act four to tell the King that Polonius is “at supper” (4.3.17), Cooke adds the following direction for himself: “*Hamlet* leans upon the Pillar, & looks steadfastly at the King” (69). “Steadfastly” is the same word he used to focus on the Ghost in Act one, suggesting a symmetrical concentration that a virtuoso such as Cooke would definitely use to advantage. He must hold his form and concentration in the swift repartee that follows concluding with his own rhetorical intensifier, “Come. For England, Ho” (70), making Cooke’s exit as raucous as it is abrupt. Rosenberg observes of this exit line what Cooke must certainly have known from physical performance: “The last moment has to be a strong one to sustain the long Hamlet gap to come.”³¹ Cooke exits dramatically—and perhaps scoring again a “hit” of applause at enthusiastic reference to England—having earned an offstage respite for the next couple of scenes.

Hamlet returns in the graveyard scene of the final act a changed man. Cooke emphasizes the change in literal terms of costume. He writes: “*Hamlet* should certainly not appear, in this Scene, in the same dress as before” (85). Something has changed in tone as well, captured in the verbal black gags of the gravediggers. Cooke, however, remonstrates in the margin against illegitimate stage business: “The disgraceful Mummery of pulling a Quantity of Cloaths off, ought to be severely reprehended” (85). Newly reinstated after Garrick’s excision, the gravediggers in *Hamlet* apparently put contemporary audiences in stitches by disrobing layer after layer before setting to work. Holding the stage well into the next century—and Rosenberg reports a variation on the theme in Toronto in 1985³²—this farcical sight gag of removing clothes was probably still fresh when Cooke staged *Hamlet* in Chester in 1785. The veteran comic Joseph Munden, listed by Cooke in the cast as doubling Polonius and the Gravedigger (2), may very well have indulged or even originated the gag. Hare claims that Munden was “developing his genius for comedy”³³ at this point. In the only investigation of this curious tradition, W.J. Lawrence conjectures that “some popular low comedian, encouraged by the welcome

³¹ *Masks of Hamlet* 744.

³² See *Masks of Hamlet* 832.

³³ Hare, *George Frederick Cooke* 42.

given to the restored Graveyard scene, deliberately set about embroidering on the First Gravedigger's part."³⁴ Whatever its origin, Cooke clearly and emphatically disapproved, as Leigh Hunt would in *The Tatler* in 1831 when he scoffed at what he termed "the folly of the waistcoats."³⁵

Cooke's critical disapproval concerning dramaturgy goes further near the conclusion. Of Ophelia's burial, he summarily observes: "This part of the play is generally most shamefully conducted" (89). Is he on guard against more "disgraceful mummery"? Did he require a little more decorum from the Gravediggers? Or perhaps from Laertes? Or was he concerned, for the sake of verisimilitude, to signal a little *less* ceremony with the burial? Clearly he is concerned with appropriate theatrical effect as the action of the play nears its conclusion. Rejecting excessive stage "business," Cooke takes pains to emphasize the Gravedigger's repartee in the script just as he cuts and moves swiftly to the play's conclusion on Horatio's line, again emended by Cooke: "And *choirs* of angels sing thee to thy rest" (100). Throughout, Cooke is as self-consciously in control as he is critically aware and esthetically responsible.

Youthful, enthusiastic, and highly remunerated, Cooke regarded the stagecraft of *Hamlet* very seriously in 1785. Cooke, however, would come to know less and less of modulated professional responsibility, haunted as he was by alcohol combined with delusions of grandeur and general dissipation. He helped open the new Theatre Royal in Newcastle in January 1788 in the role of Othello, but skipped out on his Newcastle run the following season, having performed Macbeth, Shylock, Jacques, and Benedick. Was the strain of constant virtuoso performance already beginning to tell? He was discovered ten days later a couple miles downriver in a Swalwell village tavern in a state of drunken delirium. In October 1810, he skipped England altogether, hurried by alcohol and the promise of a lucrative contract, to star in America. He was by this time, however, only a ghost of his former self. In America, he played lead Shakespearean roles as diverse as Falstaff, Iago, Shylock, and Richard III, but in *Hamlet* he appeared once only and played the Ghost.

³⁴ W.J. Lawrence *Speeding Up Shakespeare* (London: Argonaut, 1937) 213–14

³⁵ Quoted in Lawrence, *Speeding Up Shakespeare* 206.

An 1802 Covent Garden production of *Hamlet* with Cooke in the title role failed miserably. In his mid-forties at that point, Cooke seemed unequal to the task of the young hero. *The Morning Chronicle* for 28 September 1802 was polite but negative: "It is painful for us to state, that those who were disappointed in gaining admission have no reason to think themselves unfortunate. Are there any who would find pleasure in seeing a great man's laurels wither on his brow? It is much to be lamented that Mr. COOKE chose, or was compelled to make, this experiment."³⁶ His earlier work in the role Hamlet was all but forgotten by this time. His richly marked up and annotated rehearsal text from the mid-1780s probably already lay abandoned in the northern part of England. The Newcastle Literature and Philosophical Society has no record concerning its acquisition of Cooke's *Hamlet*.

The biographical record that exists describes Cooke in the main as deeply talented and professionally versatile, even creative, but also deeply sensitive and insecure. His actorly apprenticeship of some twenty-seven years in the northern provinces of England stood him in good stead when he finally debuted on the London stage at Covent Garden and across the Atlantic on tour in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Throughout his career, Cooke explored the possibilities of text, theatre, and interpretation as a virtuoso performer. He bequeathed a sense of romantic power to Edmund Kean, and Kean repaid the debt by traveling to America himself and seeing to it that Cooke's body was properly interred and his grave appropriately marked. The large memorial still stands in the churchyard of St. Paul's, New York. Cooke's rehearsal copy of *Hamlet*, inscribed personally and marked up for action on the stage, represents a memorial better suited to a virtuoso actor.³⁷

³⁶ Quoted in Hare, *George Frederick Cooke: The Actor* 143.

³⁷ My thanks are due to the Newcastle Lit and Phil Library for allowing me to peruse their copy of Cooke's *Hamlet*, also to Dr. Paul S. Smith, who brought the document to my attention and conducted me around eighteenth-century Newcastle and its environs.