

Michael Dobson

Cutting, Interruption, and the End of *Hamlet*

In this essay Michael Dobson considers the evolution of certain habitual cuts to the text of *Hamlet* between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, identifying in particular a tendency to increase the abruptness with which the play's last act interrupts its otherwise digressive movement. Looking in particular at the fate of Fortinbras, he examines changes to the ways in which these cuts have been indicated to readers, arguing that a decisive separation between the play as read and as acted makes itself felt at the turn of the nineteenth century. He concludes with a discussion of when and why it became desirable to advertise not manageably edited stage versions, but 'uncut' marathons. Michael Dobson is Director of the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon and Professor of Shakespeare Studies at the University of Birmingham. His publications include the co-editorship of *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance*, *Performing Shakespeare's Tragedies Today*, and *The Making of the National Poet*.

Key terms: acting editions of Shakespeare, textual variants, Garrick, Kemble.

THE MANY VARIATIONS between the three early printed iterations of *Hamlet* – the 'good' but impracticably long second quarto, Q2 (3,800 lines), the Folio (still long at 3,600), and the 'bad' but conveniently short first quarto, Q1 (2,200) – mean that the first task of any director of Shakespeare's most famous play is that of choosing, and editing, the text.¹ This paper investigates what a series of cuts to the performed text of *Hamlet* can tell us not just about what the play has meant but about what it has been for successive generations of readers and theatregoers from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.

To put it another way: what have people thought they were cutting when they cut *Hamlet*? When did theatregoers start to desire an uncut *Hamlet*, and did they imagine the whole play as the distillation, the average, or the aggregate of all its many iterations? I will be glancing first at some Enlightenment *Hamlets*, including the notorious 1772 acting version from which David Garrick, after playing the title role for thirty years, had finally removed what he called 'all the rubbish of the fifth act', including the voyage to England, the gravediggers, Osric, and the death of Laertes.² But I'll be suggesting that a more profound change to the general under-

standing of what *Hamlet* was came not with the cutting of Yorick but after his restoration.

This paper has two epigraphs – a risky luxury for a single short essay, but very much in keeping with one of the patterns I'll be identifying. The first is from Stanley Wells, and is simply a piece of good advice offered to generations of PhD students: 'Before giving a paper, mark your script for possible cuts in the last third.' The second is from Michael Green's classic mock how-to book *The Art of Coarse Acting* (1964):

I knew an earnest young [Method] disciple who had one line in a play. They cut his line at the first rehearsal, but every time we came to that spot a spasm used to flit over his face. When asked what the trouble was he replied, 'I've got the thought, but not the line.' In the end they had to put the line back.³

For Method actors, according to this anecdote, one of the most spasm-prone roles in world drama must surely be that of Fortinbras, who has the misfortune to appear only during the last two acts of *Hamlet*. Hamlet himself loses a whole soliloquy from Act IV in the edit by which the second quarto text becomes the folio, and the direction of travel which this cut inaugurates has been followed right down the play's performance

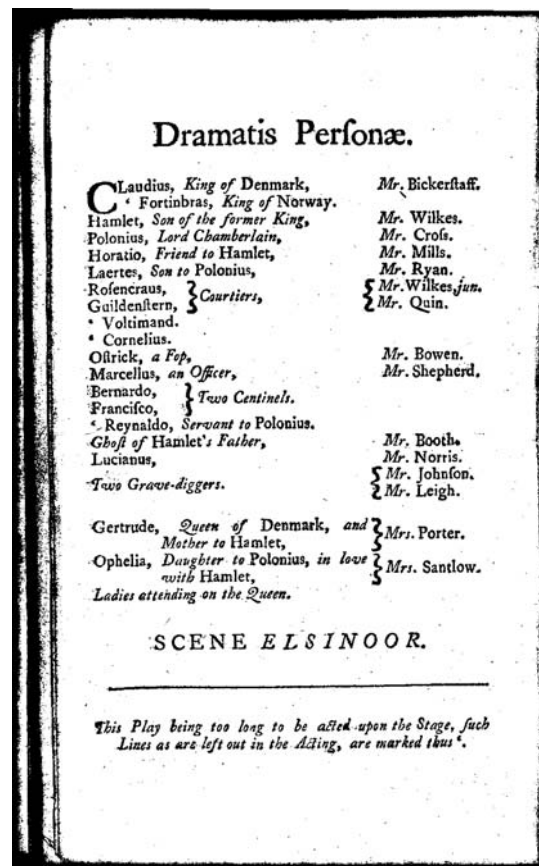
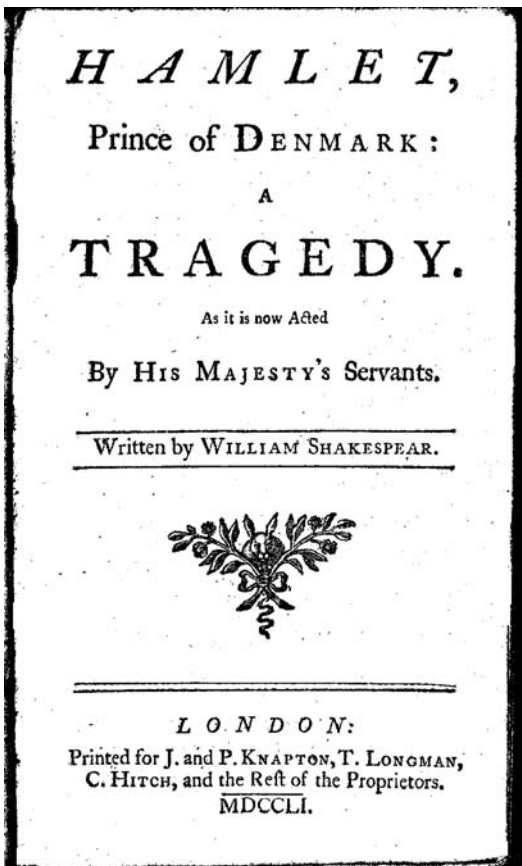


Figure 1. The 1751 reprint of the Wilks–Hughes text: title page and dramatis personae. (Author’s collection.)

history – most elegantly, perhaps, at the end of Tom Stoppard’s *Doggs’s Hamlet* (1979), when a fifteen-minute version of *Hamlet* in which some twenty speeches survive from the last scene is followed by a two-minute version in which the same scene has dwindled to eight sentences. Neither of the Stoppard versions features Fortinbras at all, and he all but vanishes, too, from John and Leela Hort’s subsequent abbreviation *The Inessential Shakespeare: Hamlet: a Shortened Version in Modern English* (1999). In this script, incidentally, Fortinbras is reduced to ending the play with the words:

Tell four officers to carry Hamlet in state to the castle wall. There is little doubt that he would have proved to be an excellent king. Beat the drums, to mark his passing! Remove the bodies: it’s like a battlefield here! Order the guns to fire!⁴

Although it carries out some intricate pieces

of adaptation involving puppets and rapid changes of costume, Simon Rae’s even shorter, one-man-show version *Hamlet Cut to the Bone* (2004) is in one respect much more faithful than are the Horts to the play’s mainstream performance tradition. Like Stoppard, Rae simply cuts Fortinbras entirely.

By 2004 Fortinbras had been on the endangered list for more than three centuries. When the Betterton–Davenant version was published in 1676, with lines omitted in performance marked by marginal inverted commas, Fortinbras was already spending Act IV twitching in the wings, giving silent orders to an invisible army. By the time the revision known as the Wilks–Hughes text (supposedly prepared for the actor Robert Wilks by the little-known editor John Hughes) appeared in 1718 he was absent from Act V too, his surviving lines re-assigned to Horatio. In the 1751 reprint of

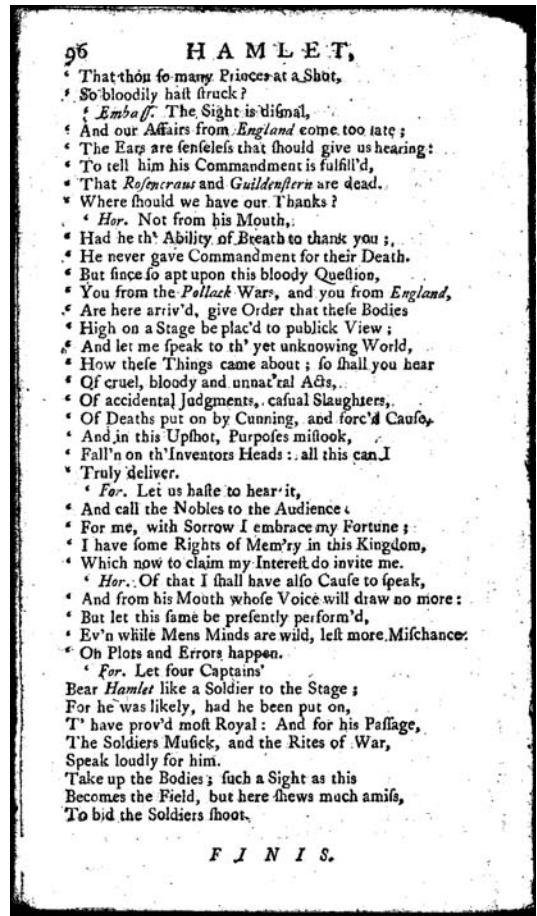
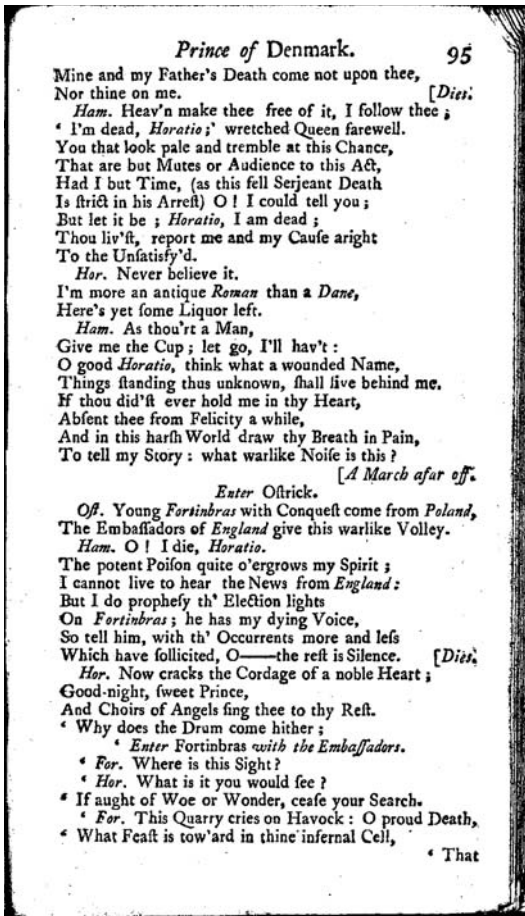


Figure 2. The last two pages, with lines not spoken in performance indicated by marginal inverted commas. Fortinbras, though visible to readers, does not appear to theatregoers; his surviving lines are reassigned to Horatio.

this version, at the time still the main acting text in use in London, Fortinbras finally goes the typographical way of Reynaldo, Voltemand and Cornelius, proscribed even on the cast list by an inverted comma (Figure 1).

In a play whose action is initiated by a walking absence, someone who has been cut off but who walks nonetheless, Fortinbras had by the middle of the eighteenth century become more ghostly than the Ghost (Figure 2). In the last scene, it's true, his curtain line 'Go bid the soldiers shoot' survives after a fashion, but along with most of the rest of the speech it is reassigned to Horatio, who in this cut of the play appears to have been playing a waiting game, quietly biding his time until the royals and aristos had killed each other before starting to give his own executive orders to the army. But the Norwegian prince

himself is never mentioned. Whereas, conversely, some version of Hamlet's line 'But look where my abridgement comes' (II, ii, 422) is remembered in every other text of *Hamlet* from Q1 to Garrick and beyond – and if ever there was a line actually begging to be cut, that must be it — Fortinbras's rights of memory in Hamlet's kingdom were by Garrick's time quite forgotten.

Or rather, they weren't, since all these editions of abbreviated stage *Hamlets* are simultaneously reading texts of the uncut play. In 1751 the play as performed and the play as read are still congruent, and what theatre practitioners do to make the play practicable and intelligible in performance – such as replacing some archaic words and phrases with modern synonyms and paraphrases – are assumed to be just as useful to

readers. *Hamlet* as read is inflected by *Hamlet* as seen and vice versa, but they are perceived as essentially the same play, recorded in the same book. Always full of interruptions, from the irruption of the ghost into the sentries' account of it onwards, this play in which the final sudden intrusion of that fell sergeant death seems designed to come as at once shocking and bathetic appears to invite the further truncation of its last movement. The cutting of Fortinbras may be less an intrusive case of depoliticization and domestication than an expression of the play's own aesthetic.

The habitual stage cuts I've described, furthermore, were entirely in keeping with the literary-critical orthodoxy of the time. Dr Johnson's view (stated in the preface to his 1765 edition) that in many of Shakespeare's plays 'the latter part is evidently neglected' is seconded by many commentators on *Hamlet*, not least Francis Gentleman, whose commentary in the acting edition published by John Bell in 1773 declares that the play as written takes 'an intolerable time', that its fourth act is 'languid', and its whole winding up 'exceeding lame', and that its catastrophe is 'the worst part of it'.⁵ When Garrick set out in 1772 to make room for more of the reflective, digressive early acts of *Hamlet* by minimizing Acts IV and V, he was, then, working within established and mutually compatible traditions of critiquing the play and of editing it for performance.

I've written elsewhere about hostile responses elicited by Garrick's alteration, which some regarded as a disgraceful concession to French neoclassicism – the satirical playlet, for instance, in which the Gravediggers remonstrate with the actor-manager about their deletion, and Arthur Murphy's burlesque of an Act I in which Shakespeare's ghost laments to Garrick/Hamlet that he has been of both his gravediggers at once despatch'd, and brought upon the stage with all Garrick's imperfections on his head.⁶ But Garrick's version continued to be acted until 1779, three whole years after his retirement: clearly not as many contemporaries objected to this cut as we might expect. Nor does the standard account of Garrick's decorum-

conscious neoclassicism being succeeded by the next generation's untrammelled romanticism quite match what happened after this version either. If anything Garrick was far more romantic and irregular a *Hamlet* without the gravediggers than was John Philip Kemble with them. Statuesque and classical, Kemble almost made 'Alas poor Yorick' into the missing tragic soliloquy Act V had never had.⁷

The decisive break in the tradition comes not with Garrick's cuts to *Hamlet*, I would argue, but with their undoing. Gentleman, though in many ways sympathetic to Garrick's alteration, didn't print it, flaunting his loyalty to the rival theatre's less drastic cut by his choice of frontispiece, which shows the Gravediggers in all their uncut glory. This whole publication, however, marks a significant departure from many earlier acting texts by printing only the dialogue which the actors were currently using. Admittedly Gentleman often supplies footnotes in which he laments or applauds particular cuts – it is 'cruel', for instance, to leave out 'Why should the poor be flattered?', but 'How all occasions do inform against me' is mentioned only as part of 'a very unessential scene, unworthy the closet and stage, therefore properly consigned to oblivion'.⁸ But apart from this residual-looking feature, his edition has combed the shortened *Hamlet* as acted out of the uncut *Hamlet* as read, which Gentleman's notes now begin to call 'the original play'.

In much of this Gentleman would be followed by Kemble. Although he boasted of his scholarly credentials and his friendship with Malone, and claimed to have re-cut *Hamlet* afresh from his own copy of Q2, Kemble mainly reverted to the old Wilks-Hughes text, successive variations of which he published at intervals from 1797 onwards. Sometimes copies subsequently became promptbooks in their turn, recording further cuts made to accommodate the measured slowness of Kemble's delivery.

Despite the resemblances between the text Kemble was using on stage and versions printed a century earlier, however, these books, which provide no indications or comments

for modern performance, while satisfying a demand for Elizabethan authenticity. Letting go of the full reading text, they clutch a few phraseal souvenirs nonetheless. This already looks strained in 1808 and it becomes impossible over the ensuing century.

By 1881 if you want a short but authentic *Hamlet* it will have to be William Poel's pioneering 'original practices' production of Q1, while if you have a lot of time for the 'original' play, you can soon have something for the first time advertised as an uncut *Hamlet*. On tour at Berkeley in 1904, for instance, Ben Greet's company played a marathon, open-air, pre-Branagh conflation of Q2 and F1 lasting four and a half hours.¹⁰ By then Johnston Forbes-Robertson had already staged what became known as 'The Eternity *Hamlet*', which started at four p.m., allowed a long enough interval for a substantial dinner, and then finished at around eleven. George Bernard Shaw, an enthusiastic Wagnerian and so no stranger to long performance times, professed a delighted astonishment. Declaring Forbes-Robertson's version to be 'really not at all unlike Shakespeare's play of the same name', he claimed that:

I am quite certain that I saw Reynaldo in it for a moment: and possibly I may have seen Voltimand and Cornelius; but just as the time for their scene arrived, my eye fell on the word 'Fortinbras' in the program, which so amazed me that I hardly know what I saw for the next ten minutes.¹¹

Forbes-Robertson's marathon would be outdone at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in the late 1940s by a production of the uncut Q2 text which was divided into two normal-play-length instalments, staged on successive evenings, so that in effect there was a 21-hour overnight interval.¹²

I don't think that this has ever been attempted in Stratford. As far as I know, the longest RSC *Hamlet* to date was Adrian Noble's in 1993 with Branagh which – like Branagh's subsequent film – drew on both Q2 and F. The production by Stephen Pimlott in 2001 must have run it a close second, though, and while it didn't provide a meal break or an overnight interval it was given

two whole intervals. If not long enough to feed the audience anything substantial, these were at least long enough to nourish the Prince, Samuel West: 'During the first interval,' he recalls,

I would eat one banana, to get me through the big soliloquies, and during the second interval I would eat two more, to get me through the sword fight. As far as I am concerned, *Hamlet* is definitively a three-banana show.¹³

The implication of these ostentatiously long productions seems to be that you can tell that *Hamlet* isn't a mere piece of entertainment by its sheer inconvenient refusal to conform to the normal conventions of show business. Its spectators are periodically invited to demonstrate their receptiveness to its untrammelled truth-telling by the enormous commitment of time it can require. By the time of Shaw the intolerable length lamented by Gentleman had become a selling point, much as a hundred years before Garrick cut the gravedigger scene, the Commonwealth droll 'The Grave-Makers' had cut everything else.

A century on from Forbes-Robertson, though, in the age of Arden 3, what would an uncut performance of *Hamlet* be like? Presumably it would have to be three successive performances, of Q1, Q2, and F1, not necessarily in that order. In practice we seem to be living simultaneously in an age of continuing antisocial marathons and one of drastic abbreviations. The most visible on the international festival circuit at the time of writing, Kelly Hunter's *Hamlet: Who's There?*, for instance, has a running time of just over 90 minutes, and goes even further than did Garrick in its classicizing pursuit of the unities: it follows Garrick's strategy of allowing Hamlet and Laertes to get on with their fight over the dead Ophelia then and there, dispensing with Osric so as to rush into the catastrophe without further ado.¹⁴ *Hamlet*, long or short, is nothing if not an unstable play, perpetually turning itself inside out, and always liable to find its last act subjected to sudden, unanticipated

Notes and References

1. The most recent scholarly edition of the play, the Arden 3, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (2006), does what it can to avoid the entire editorial problem by supplying edited texts of Q1, Q2, and F1 in succession.
2. See David Garrick, *The Letters of David Garrick*, ed. David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA, 1963), Vol. II, p. 845.
3. Michael Green, *The Art of Coarse Acting* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 73.
4. Hort, John, and Leela, *The Inessential Shakespeare: Hamlet* (London: Kabet, 1999), p. 63.
5. Francis Gentleman, in John Bell, *Bell's edition of Shakespeare's plays: as they are now performed at the Theatres Royal in London; regulated from the prompt books of each house by permission; with notes critical and illustrative; by the authors of the Dramatic censor*, 9 vols (London, 1773–4), Vol. I, *Hamlet*, p. 23, 32.
6. Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.172–6.
7. See e.g. Michael Dobson, 'John Philip Kemble', in Peter Holland, ed., *Great Shakespearians*, Vol. II (Cambridge: Continuum, 2010), p. 55–104, at p. 66.
8. Gentleman, op cit.
9. See in particular Zachary Lesser, *Hamlet after Q1: an Uncanny History of the Shakespearean Text* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).
10. This production is discussed in Don-John Dugas's forthcoming *Ben Greet in America* (London: Society for Theatre Research, 2017).
11. George Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, 3 vols (London: Constable, 1932), Vol. III, p. 200.
12. I am grateful to Peter Holland for pointing this out to me. This strategy for dealing with a very long *Hamlet* has been repeated elsewhere, for instance in Liviu Ciulei's Romanian production of 2001.
13. Samuel West, private conversation, 2010.
14. Kelly Hunter, *Hamlet: Who's There?* (London: Methuen Drama, 2016).