# Chapter 2. Prompting and Its Written Artefacts: Anecdotal Evidence

Much of our knowledge about the work done by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German prompters, and, by extension, the written artefacts they used, is anecdotal in nature.[1] Prompters were only talked about when they had to intervene, i.e., when the performance did not run as smoothly as it should have. In doing their job, prompters – and their written artefacts – appeared disruptive and exposed small mistakes.[2] Aside from being perceived as a general nuisance, disruptions that were deemed especially funny, telling, or revealing were passed on, retold (perhaps in a more pointed fashion), or became folklore. When examining the work of prompters, *fact and fiction*, i.e., claims to truth and the emphatic pleasure taken in fabulation, become indiscernible and reinforce one another. To complicate matters even further, a great number of the anecdotes in question can be found in theatre chronicles and almanacs compiled by the prompters of the time for extra income.[3] What would later be perceived as "knowledge" of the work of prompting in the emerging theatre lexicons and histories of the nineteenth century seems to be greatly indebted to this amalgamation of lore and storytelling. This makes it all the more important to use the frequently anecdotal evidence as a steppingstone to learn more about the work of prompters on the basis of their written artefacts – considering how these stories were told and what they left out.

1 For the theoretical power of the anecdotal, cf. Gallop 2002.

2 For the insight gained through interruptions, cf. Latour 2005, 81–83.

3 Cf. Ulrich 2022; cf. Žigon 2012.

## I. Prompting as a "Necessary Evil" in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century German Theatre

When, at the onset of the nineteenth century, prominent members of the local Hamburg audience lodged a complaint with the management of their once renowned Stadt-Theater about the overall quality of performances,[4] one of their main points of contention was the unwelcome, continuous interference of the prompter during the performances. Actors played up to fifty different parts a year, often a different one every night.[5] Although most of them played parts according to their *Rollenfach* [role type] (the young lover, the dame, the old bully, the young hero, etc.), there were too many lines and cues to memorise,[6] and it was impossible to be on point all the time or, sometimes, to even become familiar with one's part at all. Enter the voice of the prompter, which was not always able to meet its main requirement, namely to be heard by the actors but not by the audience.[7] The latter thus regularly witnessed the prompter at work: prompters feeding actors forgotten lines and helping out with missed cues became a constant feature of performances in Hamburg. But witnessing the prompter at work did not mean seeing them. The prompter's voice was strangely placeless; it was on the stage and yet it was not. The prompt box, from where the voice emerged, was a "Verschlag unter dem Podium des Proszeniums gerade in der Mitte zwischen den beiden Beleuchtungslampen"[8] [hutch under the proscenium podium, right in the middle, between the two lighting lamps], as it was described in a mid-nineteenth-century dictionary. This box was open towards the stage but protruded only slightly into it so as to make space for the prompter's head – and their arms in the event the prompter was also tasked with lighting and putting out tallow candles on the ramp. Thus, the prompter was both on and off stage. They were simultaneously in the light and in the dark, in the heat and in the cold. A humorous piece in one of the growing number of theatre almanacs described them as suffering from the "Last von Kälte oder Hitze; denn er verschmachtet ja im Sommer, in mitten der ihn von beiden Seiten einkeilenden hundert Lampen"[9] [burden of cold or heat; for he languishes in summer, in the midst of the hundred lamps wedging him in from both sides]. Shielded in a way

4 Cf. M. Schneider 2017, 281–287.

5 Cf. M. Schneider 2017, 10; cf. Malchow 2022, 274–282; cf. Ulrich 2008, 218–222.

6 Cf. Tkaczyk 2012.

7 "Die Hauptaufgabe des Souffleurs ist, von dem Schauspieler verstanden und von dem Publikum nicht gehört zu werden." (Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1003) [The main task of the prompter is to be understood by the actor and not heard by the audience.]

8 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 13.

9 Holzapfel 1823, 114. (Holzapfel's compilation Neuer Almanach quotes a speech by then Stadt-Theater director Friedrich Ludwig Schmidt in honour of the recently deceased prompter Heinrich Barlow.)

that emanated as little light as possible, the audience could not see that someone was both up and down there with a copy of the lines to be uttered on stage by the actors, simultaneously reading along, observing, attentively listening, and anticipating any potential pitfalls. While the audience was bothered by the sometimes unintelligible whispers or, occasionally, by the all too comprehensible interjections, prompters did not conjure their words out of thin air. Rather, they relied on the written artefacts they had with them in the dim light of their hutch. It was these stable, storable, portable, and updatable written artefacts[10] which the whole performance was based on. They went unneeded and unnoticed during the performance if lines had been sufficiently memorised, but were always at hand in the event they had not – and also somewhere close by during the everyday work of the theatre company, just in case it seemed like a good idea to brush up a tried and tested play that might fit well with the audience's current tastes.

Much of this situation was historically specific to German spoken-word theatre. During the eighteenth century, prompters had become an integral part of theatre companies.[11] Slowly, touring companies started to settle down in permanent locations as they had in Hamburg – but without enough of a population base to repeatedly perform a given play in house, sometimes not even more than once a year. During the eighteenth century, German critics notoriously called for a "purification of the stage",[12] i.e., for educational plays and stagings based on literary texts to be performed instead of the playful extemporisation of loose narrative patterns. While adherence to such theoretical demands was mixed in practice and varied from company to company, as well as from region to region, a long-lasting trend had nevertheless been set. The amount of text that actors were expected to commit to memory grew exponentially[13] and, with it, the need to provide a remedy whenever the flow of a performance stalled. This was when prompters helped out on a more than regular basis.[14] Since the prompters themselves could not possibly learn all the lines by heart, they needed written artefacts containing lines from the play to help them along. What the Hamburg audience heard was the prompter reading from a prompt book as softly as possible.

10 Cf. Latour 1986, 19f., 25–39.

11 Cf. Maurer-Schmoock 1982, 97f.

12 "Gereinigtes Theater", cf. Heßelmann 2002.

13 In addition, the authorities in some cities such as Vienna seized the opportunity to tightly control every word that was uttered on stage. Texts had to be submitted and authorised prior to performances. Moreover, there was always the chance that a policeman would be present to control the faithful recitation of the lines. Cf. Ulrich 2008, 221.

14 It was only when the state began owning or at least supporting German theatres that their reliance on the prompter decreased. For this transition period in Hamburg, cf. Brauneck/Müller/Müller-Wesemann 1989, 98–155.

The audience's complaints about the profuse reliance on prompters, and therefore their written artefacts, was a staple of intra-theatrical discussion about aesthetic standards and technical requirements during the first half of the nineteenth century. The high demands placed on the actors by the ever-changing repertory of plays ran counter to prevailing notions of what an ideal performance should look like. The late eighteenth century prided itself on its new acting style developed and refined in Schröder's company, the "natürliche"[15] [natural] Hamburg style of acting, intended to convey the impression that the audience was witnessing an only ever so slightly enhanced truth on stage. This style fit in well with the predominance of prose plays that were being put forward by the playwrights of the time.[16] A shift in the early nineteenth century saw renewed emphasis being placed on the artifice of acting as developed in Iffland's declamatory Berlin style and in the strictly metrical style of the new dramas being influenced by Goethe's and Schiller's Weimar aesthetics.[17] As constant background noise, the prompter's murmuring undermined both aesthetic concepts – the illusion of nature and the artifice of art. Both were exposed as something that had been created by the cranking nuts and bolts of the theatre apparatus. Instead of embodying characters and creating an artistic illusion onstage, even the most personal of means that such characters brought to the table – their words – were being injected from an obscure place inside the theatrical infrastructure – and read in a hushed voice from an unseen written artefact.

A practitioner like Friedrich Ludwig Schmidt, who had first been an actor before becoming a co-principal at the Hamburg Stadt-Theater from 1815 to 1841, mused in the 1820s on the ugly sight of the "Kapsel des unterirdischen Orakels" [capsule of the subterranean oracle] that was the prompt box containing its inhabitant. While the figure of Hanswurst had (supposedly) been chased from the eighteenth-century boards, the ideal nineteenth-century stage would now have to be purged of the prompt box, which was a stand-in for the prompter – and, by extension, for the written artefacts they used:

> Gelänge es den "Einhelfer", wie man früher in ehrlichem Deutsch sagte, ganz zu verbannen, so wäre damit eine wahre Herkulesarbeit geglückt. O welch ein unschätzbarer Reiz wäre der Schauspielkunst gewonnen, wenn die Kapsel des unterirdischen Orakels nicht mehr mitten im Vordergrunde der Bühne figurirte, – sie, die in jeder Hinsicht ein schreiender Übelstand ist und an die nur hundertjähriger Schlendrian uns gewöhnen konnte![18] [If the "helper", as they used to say in straight-

15 Malchow 2022, 187.

16 Cf. Kob 2000, 137f.

17 Cf. Heeg 1999.

18 Schmidt 1875, 139.

> forward German, could be banished completely, it would be the achievement of a true Herculean task. O what inestimable charm would be gained for the art of acting if the capsule of the subterranean oracle no longer figured in the foreground of the stage – in every respect it is a glaring nuisance to which only a century of carelessness could have accustomed us!]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the irritating, excessive reliance on prompters and their written artefacts had made it into the new German theatre lexicons and encyclopaedias (being published by insiders above all for other insiders). In their 1841 *Theater-Lexikon*, Philipp Jakob Düringer and Heinrich Ludwig Barthels grumbled:

> Die englischen Theater haben ihren Souffleur in den Kulissen stehen, und brauchen ihn nur, im Falle Einer stecken bleibt; die Franzosen haben den Souffleurkasten wie wir, und ihr Souffleur schlägt nur die Perioden an; bei uns hat der Arme am meisten zu tun, denn leider nur zu oft ist er dazu da, um das ganze Stück vorzulesen, mindestens in jedem Stücke einige Rollen.[19] [The English theatres have their prompter standing in the wings, and only need him in the event that an actor gets stuck; the French have the prompter's box like us, and their prompter only cues a new period; in our theatres, the poor man has the most to do, for unfortunately, he is all too often there to read out the whole play, at least some roles in each.]

The reliance on a written artefact is implied but not explicitly stated. As the mediator between written artefact and actors, the prompter was proclaimed to be the metonymical root of the problem. In their competing 1846 lexicon, Blum, Herloßsohn, and Marggraff gave the continuous grind of the everchanging repertory as the reason, if not an excuse, for German actors' dependence on the inhabitant of the prompt box:

> Man hat häufig das franz. Theater als mußtergültig ausgestellt […] und auf die leider nicht zu verkennenden Folgen hingedeutet, welche die fortdauernde Thätigkeit des deutschen S.s auf die Darstellung hat. […] [M]an vergißt indessen, daß in Frankreich 20 bis 30 Proben stattfinden, wo in Deutschland höchstens 3 […]; daß ein Stück täglich so lange hintereinander fort gegeben wird, bis das Publikum sich gleichgültig gegen dasselbe zeigt, während in Deutschland täglich Anderes und unersättlich Neues verlangt wird. […] Die fortdauernde Thätigkeit des S.s. ist also in Deutschland ein nothwendiges Uebel […].[20] [The French theatre has often been

19 Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1004.

20 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 11f. The thoroughly practical problem of the prompter on the German stage is discussed in terms that are highly theoretical and even metaphysical. This discourse is a prime example of what Jacques Derrida has analysed as the logic of the "danger-

> described as exemplary […] and hints have been made at the unmistakeable consequences of the continuous activity of the German p[rompter] for the theatrical presentation. […] However, one forgets that in France, 20 to 30 rehearsals take place, while in Germany 3 at most […]; that a play is performed every day, day after day, until the audience has become indifferent to it, while in Germany something different and insatiably new is demanded on a daily basis. […] Therefore, the continuous activity of the p[rompter] in Germany is a necessary evil.]

In spite of all attempts at explanation, the unpopular but intimate relationship between German actors and prompters – and implicitly with their written artefacts as well – was constantly being panned and slammed by critics and academics. In his influential 1843 *Wissenschaftlich-literarische Encyklopädie der Aesthetik* [*Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*], Hebenstreit demonstrated his abhorrence for the customary "Kunst auf den Souffleur zu spielen"[21] [art of playing to the prompter], an idiom that even received its own entry in Düringer and Barthels's lexicon.[22] According to Hebenstreit, instead of presenting a fleshed-out character, the actor became a lifeless puppet, a "Maschine, die durch den Souffleur aufgezogen wird"[23] [machine wound up by the prompter]. Biting remarks about actors' ineptitude were legion in the proliferation of chronicles and almanacs compiled by working or former nineteenth-century prompters as well as in the first overviews of modern theatre history. Actors came to stand in front of the prompt box "wie angepicht"[24] [as if pinned down]; they repeated empty interjections while waiting for "das fehlende Wort" [the missing word] and seemed more "zu Hause"[25] [at home] in the prompt box than in their roles. The most damning judgment that could be made about a performance was "daß der Souffleur an dieser Bühne die Hauptperson sei"[26] [that the prompter is the main character at this theatre]. The audience is said to have taken it with composure, even amusement, when a popular but forgetful actor found the prompt box empty one evening and, as a matter of course, declared: "Verzeihen Sie, ich kann nicht weiter spielen, der Souffleur ist

ous supplement" (Derrida 1984, 141): something that is, on the one hand, necessary to produce a stable, coherent identity of some sort but that, on the other hand, undermines that very stability and coherence in that it is external to such an identity. Even more to the point, the voice of the prompter spells out what Derrida has called "[l]a parole soufflée" (Derrida 1978, 169) at the heart of Antonin Artaud's twentieth-century theatre aesthetics: the horror of an external force which has infected the performers' (and humanity's) core by whispering in its own words and thoughts.

21 Hebenstreit 1843, 726.

22 Cf. Düringer/Barthels 1841, 85.

23 Hebenstreit 1843, 726.

24 *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* 1845c, 459.

25 *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* 1846, Nr. 116, 462.

26 Devrient 1848, 108.

nicht auf seinem Posten"[27] [Excuse me, I cannot play any further, the prompter is not at his post].

It was only on rare occasions that prompters themselves were noticed as participants in the performance rather than as disembodied voices – when the usual procedures were interrupted by their mistakes or defiance. On such occasions, commentators struck a good-natured or amused tone, e.g., when a prompter was even more moved by the play than the audience and burst into tears: "[e]in seltenes Kompliment für Dichter und Darsteller"[28] [a rare compliment for poet and performer]. But normally, the pervasiveness of the "necessary evil" that everything depended on, although it needed to be obscured at every turn, found an outlet in epithets that were simultaneously flowery and biting:

> "Theatralischer Schachtmeister und Hütten-Inspector", "Unentbehrlicher Versteckspieler", "Declamatorischer Rede-Fluß-Schleusenmeister", "König der Echo's", "Urquell der ästhetischen Ergötzlichkeiten", "Ohrenbläser und Wort-Eingeber", "Hebebaum des versunkenen Thespis-Karren", "unterirdischer Magnet der Oberwelt", "Magister legens", "Theoretischer Universal-Schauspieler und dramatischer Revisor", "Grundstein vom Tempel Thalia's"[29] [Theatrical shaft master and hut inspector, indispensable hide-and-seek player, declamatory speech-flow lockmaster, king of echoes, fountainhead of aesthetic delights, ear blower and word feeder, lever of the sunken Thespis cart, subterranean magnet of the upper world, magister legens, theoretical universal actor and dramatic revisor, foundation stone of Thalia's temple]

The joke in most of these metaphors and descriptions is that the hidden emergency responder is another actor in the play – or even its "main character" – drawing on the discrepancy between the significance of the prompter for the performance and their insignificant and thoroughly humble position at their workplace. However, all of these descriptions either take for granted or ignore the fact that prompters themselves were not the originators of the lines they fed the hapless actors. Prompters were not "universal actors" but, first and foremost, readers. And with them down in the "shaft", they had written artefacts from which they read in a hushed voice. Indeed, the joke would lose its punchline if it referred to this self-evident technical requirement. The work of the prompter depended on an auxiliary item, a written artefact that contained a version of the dramatic text that was to be performed. Prompters were therefore special kinds of readers who had to be alert to any discrepancies between what was recorded in the written artefact and

27 Devrient 1848, 278.

28 *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* 1845b, 304.

29 As compiled by Paul S. Ulrich 2008, 223.

what was actually transpiring on stage. In fact, the written artefacts, the prompt books, were the truly "indispensable" "foundation stones" of performances. The actors fully relied on the prompter's ability to make good use of the prompt book – to reliably read along, to know when to intervene, to restore order when someone bungled up a passage or jumped to an entirely different part of the play, and to anticipate any potential problems.

It is only when we examine the entanglement between the written artefact, the prompter, the actors, and the overall infrastructure of the work at a theatre company that the role that prompting played in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German theatre comes into view. Importantly, prompt books provide more than enough evidence of the theatrical practices implemented on stage at a given point in time and attest to how a given literary text was adapted. It was the practices implemented with and upon these written artefacts that tied many of the knots that these entanglements consist of. Therefore, the focus of this study is on the prompt books themselves and the ways in which they lent "affordance"[30] to such entanglements. The following chapters will try to explain in depth why and how this was the case. But for now, let us retrace the relationship between prompters and their written artefacts in more (anecdotal) detail.

## II. A Question of Honour: Taking Care of the Written Artefacts of Prompting and More

As we will explain over the course of this study, the written artefacts used in the prompt box contained the lines of a company's specific version of a given play as well as any additional information the prompter might require. The prompters usually took care of the "Zeichen zum Anfangen und Endigen des Acts, die Verwandlungen, Tag und Nachtmachen u.s.w."[31] [signs at the beginning and end of an act, the transformations of the scene, light cues for day and night etc.]. The orchestra conductor was usually located at the back of the box, towards the audience, and could be notified of any action that needed to be taken by a knock. The equipment in the box varied depending on the technical equipment on stage, as did the cues that needed to be recorded in the prompt book. In an opera house, the prompter might have been able to operate the bellows with their feet or might have had bell pulls to notify stage workers of impending tasks.[32] On a stage without a prompt box, they might have whispered the words from the side of the stage as was custom in English theatres. The Hamburg Stadt-Theater stage at Gänsemarkt

30 Gibson 1986, 130–134; cf. Levine 2015, 6–11.

31 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 11.

32 Cf. the article "Zeichen" [signs] in Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1136–1139.

was not particularly technically sophisticated,[33] but anecdotes relay that it had a conventional prompt box from which lines could be fed and signs could be given.

The prompter also acted as the librarian at Hamburg's Stadt-Theater in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At least, this is how Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, the long-standing Hamburg principal, described the prompter when he put forward his *Gesetze des Hamburgischen Theaters* [*Laws of the Hamburg Theatre*], the internal code of conduct for his company that Schröder formulated as a set of rules and regulations and then printed and circulated in the 1790s. The first of the "Gesetze den Souffleur betreffend" [Regulations concerning the prompter] immediately states that "er zugleich Bibliothekar ist" [he is also the librarian]. However, this definition characterised the prompter as being somewhere between a bookkeeper in the literal sense, i.e., as caretaker of all written artefacts, and a scribe. The prompter "muss die Bücher in gehöriger Ordnung erhalten, und bey dem Verluste seiner Ehre kein Manuscript ohne Anfrage weggeben, und jede Entwendung zu verhüten suchen, damit Autor und Director nicht Schaden leiden" [has to keep the texts in good order and must not give away any scripts without authorisation at the risk of forfeiting his honour, and he must try to prevent any theft so that neither the author nor the director suffers any damage]. The books in question included a "Hauptbuch der Rollenvertheilung" [main book of casting] with notes about sets, props, and running time; a "Hauptbuch der Garderobe" [main book of wardrobe]; a "Requisitenbuch" [prop book]; and a "Decorationsbuch" [scenery book][34]. In Schröder's theatre, the prompter also produced most of the other written artefacts, no matter their function. These ranged from "circulars" which needed to be sent around and signed by everyone concerned to all written artefacts used on stage: "Er schreibt die Briefe, welche nebst den Schriften und Büchern auf dem Theater zu seinen Requisiten gehören"[35] [He writes the letters, which, alongside the writings and books, belong to his props at the theatre]. In short, prompters operated something akin to an "office" in the modern administrative sense in that they presided over the interface between all stored written artefacts and their utilisation. At the same time, they were the main users of this living archive.[36]

Rather incidentally, Schröder's regulations also tell us that the prompter was involved in copying out the various roles of the actors, who as a matter of convention only received their lines and cues in a small booklet: "Wenn er Zeit und Lust hat, selbst Rollen zu schreiben, so werden sie ihm bezahlt"[37] [If he has the time and inclination to write out parts himself he will receive [extra] payment]. In practice,

33 Cf. Malchow 2022, 138ff.

34 Schröder 1798, 28; Brandt 1992, 112.

35 Schröder 1798, 29; Brandt 1992, 113.

36 Cf. Meynen 2004, 11.

37 Schröder 1798, 29; Brandt 1992, 113.

this also referred to the writing of the content of the prompt books. Jacob Herzfeld, one of the co-principals in Hamburg from 1798 to 1826, stated in the 1800s that he preferred the handwriting of Heinrich Barlow, the Stadt-Theater prompter from 1796 until his death in 1820, to that of every other scribe.[38] One of his later co-principals, Friedrich Ludwig Schmidt, stated in Barlow's obituary that the prompter spent a lot of his spare time "mit Abschreiben von Stücken und Rollen […]. Er war ein solcher Geschwindschreiber, daß er nach einer mäßigen Schätzung in den letzten vierzehn Jahren […] mindestens 28,000 Bögen à 3 Schilling geschrieben haben muß"[39] [with copying plays and rolls […]. He was such a fast writer that, by a conservative estimate, he must have written at least 28,000 sheets for 3 shillings each in the last fourteen years].

As we explained in the introduction, the role of the librarian came with huge responsibility. Before the advent of copyright laws, a successful play was a valuable commodity. Companies did not want to share their plays, and playwrights could only expect to be paid by the principal if their new work was not commercially (or otherwise) available in print yet. Therefore, Schröder's regulations tasked the prompter with "preventing theft". The previously quoted second rule codified a common eighteenth-century practice by decreeing it mandatory to "have the actors' parts [in a play] copied by two or more persons". Thus, none of the scribes and none of the actors would have a copy of the complete play in hand that they could sneak out.

At this point in theatre history, actors were usually familiar with the play as a whole. Building on Ekhof and his own stepfather Ackermann, Schröder had employed reading rehearsals and later introduced the practice of rehearsing the whole play. Actors now worked as an ensemble, but those who spontaneously jumped in as substitutes were not usually given access to the complete play. This made their work difficult since the play to be performed in the evening was often only announced the evening before or on the day of the performance itself. Karoline Schulze Kummerfeld, who would later star as Iphigenie, wrote of Clara Hoffmann, prompter in the Ackermann company: "Die war auf die Bücher wie der Teufel auf eine Seele. Kurz, ich bekam's nicht. […] Daß ich nicht […] ganz so gespielt, wie ich hätte sollen, war kein Wunder"[40] [She was after the books like the devil after a soul. In short, I didn't get it. […] It was no surprise […] that I didn't perform as I should have].

38 Barlow was "der einzige, dem wir das copiren der mcpte anvertrauen" (quoted in Neubacher 2016, 25) [the only one we entrust with copying the manuscripts]. In Chapter 6, section 5, we discuss supplements to *Nathan der Weise* written by Barlow.

39 Schmidt 1875, 141f.

40 Schulze-Kummerfeld 1915, 105f.; cf. Maurer-Schmoock 1982, 98f.; cf. Malchow 2022, 219.

The caution taken by Schröder and his predecessor was well-founded: prompters were popular first points of contact (often behind the principal's back) for those in search of a specific play or stage adaptation. In his essay on the prompter in German theatre, nineteenth-century actor Hermann Schöne recalled some of the widely circulating anecdotes:

> An Johann Fr. Schütze in Hamburg schrieb ein kursächsischer Buchhändler ganz ehrlich (!) und rund heraus: "Sie kennen ohne Zweifel den Souffleur der Schröderschen Bühne. Senden Sie mir doch gelegentlich durch ihn (oder mit seiner Hilfe) Manuskripte Schillerscher Stücke. Ich will sie gut bezahlen." – Holtei erzählt vom Souffleur W. beim Königlichen Theater in Berlin, daß er einen verbotenen Kleinhandel mit abgeschriebenen Manuskripten betrieb. In späteren Jahren verfielen neue Couplets und Einlagen aller Arten, trotz Vorsichtsmaßregeln der Urheber und Eigentümer, den Geiersgriffen der Souffleure, welche Abschriften machten und verkauften, bis endlich die Gesetze zum Schutze des geistigen Eigentums diesem Standrechte ein Ende machten.[41] [To Johann Fr. Schütze in Hamburg, a bookseller from the Electorate of Saxony wrote in a quite frank (!) and uninhibited manner: "You undoubtedly know the prompter at Schröder's stage. Please occasionally send me manuscripts of Schiller's plays through him (or with his help). I will pay you well for them." – Holtei tells the story of the prompter W. at the Royal Theatre in Berlin, who ran a small, forbidden trade in copied manuscripts. In later years, despite the precautions taken by authors and owners, new couplets and inserts of all kinds fell into the vulture's grip of prompters who made and sold copies, until the laws for the protection of intellectual property finally put an end to that privilege.]

Thus, in Schröder's day, the prompter-librarian was the weak link in protecting the written artefacts from wider circulation. Only the prompter's "honour", as Schröder's *Gesetze* referred to it, stood between their safe-keeping and the abuse detailed by Schöne.

Being promoted to librarian, a position of considerable responsibility, was at odds with the historical reality of the profession. In the mid-eighteenth century, prompters were often actors who had just started out or who had too little talent for the stage.[42] One Johann Christian Brandes had to start with "zugleich Rollen schreiben, […] die Stelle eines Souffleurs vertreten, und auch in den Baletten mitfiguriren"[43] [copying parts, […] taking the place of the prompter, and also performing in the ballets all at once]. The responsibility for the written artefacts may have organically developed out of the subordinate activity as a copyist but altogether

41 Schöne 1904, 135; cf. Ulrich 2008, 224ff.

42 Cf. Maurer-Schmoock 1982, 98.

43 Brandes 1799, 173.

represented a qualitative leap: a promotion from the lowest rank in the company to the position of librarian responsible for everything.

Goethe's famous bildungsroman *Wilhem Meisters Lehrjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*] (published in the mid-1790s), which is also an ironic itinerary through recent theatre history, demonstrates a playful take that nonetheless gets to the point in question. When the prompter of a company (that is more or less based on Schröder's in Hamburg) moves up to the position of actor (in a twofold sense, as he takes on the role of lead actor in the traveling theatre company in *Hamlet*), a drifting youth named Friedrich (who had been following around the company staging *Hamlet* out of love for another actor) is swiftly employed as prompter. Once their theatrical careers come to an end, he and his mistress hide away in a library and read books out loud to each other without understanding them.[44] In the 1820s sequel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*], Friedrich is then promoted to the role of professional archivist.[45] While the two latter parts of the storyline no longer take place within the realm of theatre, they clearly spell out the development from prompter to archivist-librarian that underlies Schröder's conflation of the two positions: the prompter becomes an archivist by mechanically reading out lines which would not normally concern them at all.

A good century after Brandes started out as a prompter and copyist, the new theatre lexicons and encyclopaedias listed the librarian as a separate profession but still proposed that their work could be done in tandem with another administrative role such as that of secretary, inspector, or, thirdly, prompter.[46] The question is, however, to which extent Schröder's 1790s or Düringer and Barthels's 1840s ideal was put into practice on a larger scale. When the Hamburg Stadt-Theater moved to its new building at Dammtorstraße (now home to the opera house), a new owner had to negotiate with Schröder's heirs to gain the rights to use the company's collection of prompt books. When Schröder died in 1816, he was still the main owner of all the written artefacts, which he, and after him his heirs, leased to the company. A late-nineteenth-century history of the Stadt-Theater claimed that, ten years later, the collection, precursor to today's Theater-Bibliothek, did not have a proper caretaker and was in a sorrowful state. The supposed librarian is not named but seems to have been someone not wholly devoted to the task at hand:

> [ein] beliebiger Mann, der auf die Soufflirbücher und Rollen Acht zu geben hatte, denn von einer wirklichen Fürsorge, welche die Direction der Bibliothek gewidmet hätte, war gar keine Rede. Es sind durch Unkenntniß und beispiellose Schleuderei Schätze und bibliographische Seltenheiten ersten Ranges rettungslos zu Grunde

44 Cf. Goethe 1988a, 554–559.

45 Cf. Goethe 1988b, 334f.

46 Cf. Düringer/Barthels 1841, 162.

> gegangen. Die werthvolle Büchersammlung, welche Schröder mit Liebe und Sorgfalt angelegt hatte […] – Alles ist zersprengt, zertrümmert, zerstört, theilweise nach Gewicht an Käsehöker verhauft worden, weil die Directoren einer Bühne wie das Stadttheater in Hamburg diesen Dingen das gebührende Interesse selten oder nie gewidmet haben.[47] [The library was left in the hands of a random man who had to take care of the prompt books and actors' parts, for there was no question of any real care given by management to the library. Treasures and bibliographical rarities of the most important kind have been lost due to ignorance and unprecedented recklessness. The valuable collection of books which Schröder had built up with love and care […] – Everything was shattered, smashed, destroyed, and some of it sold by the pound to cheesemongers, because the principals of a theatre such as the Stadttheater in Hamburg have seldom or never devoted the proper interest to these things.]

The sale of written artefacts like prompt books to the local cheesemonger is an extreme example of what Schröder's "first law of theatre concerning the prompter" was supposed to prevent – "at the forfeiture of his honour". However, such "honour" turned out to be a rather fragile concept in the context of Schröder's theatre regulations and warrants closer inspection.

In effect, the appeal to the prompter-librarian's "honour" did not fit in neatly with the rest of the regulations, especially the ones concerning the actors, which take up most of the space. Internal regulations had existed in European travelling theatres since the sixteenth century but proliferated in the German-speaking world since the 1780s.[48] Schröder had been using his own "Theatergesetze" (literally "theatre laws") adopted from other troops since the 1780s, and, in 1792, he presented his own regulations, which were considered particularly progressive because they proclaimed bilateralism: "Gesetze müssen Dämme sein gegen Despotie […] und Heftigkeit der Direction; Dämme gegen Nachlässigkeit, Unsittlichkeit und Heftigkeit der Schauspieler. Die Direction muß weder willkürlich strafen noch entschuldigen können"[49] [Laws must be dams against despotism […] and the wrath of the principal; dams against negligence, immorality, and the vehemence of actors. The principal should not be able to either punish in an arbitrary fashion or to make excuses]. This was to guarantee the welfare of everyone: through professional performances as recorded in the prompt book – and therefore through a flourishing treasury. As travellers, the members of a theatre company had no civil rights well into the nineteenth century. If principals could present their regula-

47 Uhde 1879, 14.

48 Cf. Bishop/Henke 2017, 29–31. For the German context since the 18th century, cf. Dewenter/Jakob 2018.

49 Schröder 1798, 4.

tions when applying for a performance permit, the company would seem at least concerned about order, and it was more likely they would obtain the permit.[50]

Accordingly, the regulations often address members' public conduct. Even the slightest impression of the petty crime and prostitution associated with travelling folk was to be avoided. However, instead of, for example, self-organised "arrest" Schröder's *Laws* stipulated fines for misdemeanours: betraying trade secrets or spreading false rumours, being late for rehearsals, and missing performances were all punishable by fines of up to a month's salary.[51] In most theatre regulations of the time, the director stood apart from those affected by the "laws", much like the sovereign in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.[52] As in most other theatre regulations, in Schröder's *Laws* there were no regulations pertaining specifically to the principal either. However, the other "laws" not only applied to him as well, but the principal, i.e., Schröder, also paid double the fine in each case.[53] The former absolute ruler of the theatre world did not lose any of their power but was now inside and outside the rule of (theatre) law at the same time.

Many penalties imposed on actors concerned their knowledge of their parts and forbade them from deviating from the given text. What was seemingly self-evident – the text needed to be memorised, rehearsed, and reproduced in the performance – was thus guaranteed by a plethora of minor threats of punishment. Earlier in the eighteenth century, an army of soloists generally stood around, uninvolved, until it was their turn to speak. Now, the small penalties imposed by Schröder's *Laws* were intended to create a coherent ensemble performance in which every actor came across as if they were uttering their lines naturally.

Reading Schröder's Hamburg theatre regulations alongside Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is illuminating – in particular Foucault's famous chapters about the transformation of state law in the eighteenth-century France from sovereign power (tied to the person of the sovereign) to disciplinary power.[54] Like in Foucault's text, in Schröder's *Gesetze*, it was no longer about a theatre sovereign acting despotically against a band of tramps who could scatter to the four winds overnight and thus escape the principal's tyranny. In 112 paragraphs of minute detail, Schröder's *Laws* name as many offences as imaginable and decree what Foucault calls "the gentle way in punishments"[55] for all of them: just severe enough to deter and thus to maintain order within the company and on stage.

50 Cf. Dewenter/Jakob 2018, 9.

51 Cf. Schröder 1798, 10–18.

52 Cf. M. Schneider 2018, 107–111.

53 Cf. Schröder 1798, 21.

54 Cf. Foucault 1995, 73–103.

55 Foucault 1995, 104.

The attention to detail in this, in Foucault's words, "microphysics of power"[56] within the theatre company finds its equivalent in the aforementioned aesthetics of the "natural" acting style that dominated in Hamburg. In the prompt books, psychological scores are recorded in detail, including Schröder's famous pauses, for example, before and during King Lear's outbursts of madness.[57] In many performances, however, the psychologically accurate portrayal did not stem from the much-vaunted "reality" that was to be presented on stage but, to a considerable extent, from the prompt book read out from the prompt box. Moreover, the whispered speech was always the precursor to the fine, which was to be avoided by memorising the part.

However, as previously stated, the prompter was not threatened with fines like everybody else when it came to the upkeep of the prompt books. This is where the "forfeiture of honour" in the event of loss or unfair surrender of the book made its entrance, which was the prompter's penalty. Losing one's honour was both a minimum and maximum punishment – but it did not quite fit in with the disciplinary regime of small penalties put forward in the other regulations. On the contrary, honour and loss of honour were the principles of the form of power that preceded disciplinary power in Foucault's paradigm shift. According to the famous description by Montesquieu, honour and loss of honour were part of a monarchical, absolutist form of government.[58] Disgraced noble people who had forfeited their honour were exposed to contempt and would probably be expelled from court. One can extend this argument to less noble realms: being ostracised from her family might have proven dangerous and even fatal for a woman who had "lost her honour", but such danger fell outside the purview of the law, and that was precisely the point. Similarly, the prompter's honour could not be regulated by the principles of the "rule of law" promised by Schröder's regulations. Honour thus had no place in the "disciplinary society" analysed by Foucault but was firmly established in the previous power relationship outlined in *Discipline and Punish*, i.e., that of the sovereign power which lets live and makes die but does not care much about how life is organised. Was a person exposed to contempt perhaps expelled from theatre society and thus left to their own devices, but robbed of the protection of the sovereign? Who would take responsibility for the vast number of written artefacts without an extensive handover? Did the threat ultimately remain empty because the prompter-librarian was too knowledgeable and thus, in their own "subterranean" way, too powerful? Ultimately, it was not only the principal who was both inside and outside the law in Schröder's regulations but also the prompter, who was responsible for preserving and using (and often enough

56 Foucault 1995, 26.

57 Cf. Chapter 3, section 3.

58 Cf. Montesquieu 2004, 154f.

creating) the written artefacts used in prompting. Just like the prompter in their box was both on and off stage, their position as caretakers of the written artefacts also gave them an at once powerful and precarious position within and outside of the theatre company's day-to-day operations. The prompter was the least and most important member at the same time; the prompt books they took care of and read out in a semi-loud fashion formed the basis of the whole theatrical endeavour – and yet this endeavour only worked in the proper sense when the prompter's existence was forgotten as much as possible during the performance.

As a matter of fact, the question of honour seems to be historically tied to the Schröder era and perhaps to the Hamburg company. When Düringer and Barthels came up with their own proposition for theatre regulations half a century later, prompters were subjected to "gentle punishments" specific to their occupation but based on the same overall principles that were in place for everyone else.[59] But what might have come down to loose wording in Schröder's *Gesetze* still shines a spotlight on the both central and marginal place occupied by the task of taking care of the prompt books.

## III. Prompt Books in Reading: At the Prompter's Whim

In mid-nineteenth-century theatre lexicons and encyclopaedias, the prompter comes across as something of a quick-witted polymath, with the knowledge required to maintain a constant overview of the play's action, all its minutiae, and all the interdependencies between the various details. Prompters were perceptive enough to decide then and there how to fix what had gone off the rails, i.e., to lead actors back to passages they had skipped, to introduce rough summaries when needed, or to leave out skipped passages if they were no longer necessary. The prompter had to be "ein Mann von Bildung"[60] [an educated man]. Their capabilities consisted "in einem großen Interesse an der Sache, […] in Kenntnis lebender und todter Sprachen und in der Beurteilungskraft, ob eine vom Schausp. übersprungene Stelle unbeschadet wegbleiben, oder zum Verständnis des Ganzen derselbe wieder darauf zurückgebracht warden muß"[61] [in a great interest in the overall matter, […] in knowledge of living and dead languages, and in the power of judging whether a passage skipped by the actor can be left out without harm, or if, for the understanding of the whole, the actor must be brought back to it]. This meant, first of all, having "Geistesgegenwart in verwickelten Fällen" [presence of mind in complicated cases] and might even have included "kleine verbindende Extempo-

59 Cf. Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1175.

60 Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1004.

61 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 12.

re's" [small connecting extemporisations] that were improvised on the spot by the prompter and then given to the actors as if they were their regular lines.[62]

In addition to the play, the ideal prompter was also highly familiar with the actors performing it: "Er muß den einzelnen Schauspielern ihre Eigenheiten ablauschen und ihre Schwächen genau studiren"[63] [He must come to learn the idiosyncrasies of the individual actors and study their weaknesses carefully]. In theory, the prompter thus needed to be able to predict potential deviations from the text by becoming familiar with the actors' quirks and foibles. In practice however, prompters often found themselves confronted with the highly diverse demands made by actors. A humorous poem that can be found in one of the prompters' almanacs goes to the heart of the matter:

Oft ruft einer: "Lassen Sie sich sagen,
Mir souffliren Sie heut' Wort für Wort!"
Jene bittet: "Mir nur angeschlagen,
So komm' ich gewiß gut auf Sie fort."
"Mir das erste Wort von jeder Zeile!"
(Ruft der Dritte hastig hinterdrein;)
"Und bei mir, mein Bester, keine Eile,
(Spricht der Vierte) und nicht zu sehr schrein'!"
Will dem Fünften nun die Red' nicht munden,
Spricht er nach der Vorstellung Verlauf:

62 "Die Hauptaufgabe des Souffleurs ist, von dem Schauspieler verstanden und von dem Publikum nicht gehört zu werden. […] Geistesgegenwart in verwickelten Fällen, dazu nöthige Kenntniß fremder Sprachen, müssen ihn in den Stand setzen, das Stück im geregelten Gange zu erhalten, indem er mit gehöriger Ruhe immer über der Darstellung wacht, bei eingetretenen Stockungen oder Verwirrungen, selbst durch kleine verbindende Extempore's, welche er dem außer Fassung gekommenen betreff. Schauspieler soufflirt. Ebenso muß ein tüchtiger Souffleur im Augenblick übersehen und zu beurtheilen im Stande sein, ob das Springen (Ueberschlagen) eines Schauspielers dem deutlichen Verständnisse des Ganzen keinen Eintrag thut; in diesem Falle kann und muß er mit- u. nachspringen, im andern aber muß er den Schauspieler wieder zurückführen und die nöthigen Reden mit etwa nöthigen Einleitungen souffliren." (Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1003f.) [The main task of the prompter is to be understood by the actor and not heard by the audience. […] Presence of mind in complicated cases, the necessary knowledge of foreign languages, must enable him to keep the play in order, by always watching over the performance with a proper calmness, in the event of stagnation or confusion, even by small connecting extemporisations, which he then whispers to the actor who has lost his composure. In the same way, a competent prompter must be able to see and judge at a moment's notice whether an actor's skipping of a passage is not detrimental to the clear understanding of the whole; in this case he can and must go along and follow, but in the other case he must lead the actor back again and prompt the necessary speeches with all necessary introductions.]

63 Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1004.

"Sagen Sie, was machten Sie denn unten?
Heute paßten Sie gar nicht auf!"[64]

[Often, someone calls: "Let me tell you,
You are prompting word for word for me today!"
Asks another: "For me only the first words [of the section]
then I'm sure I'll get along well with you."
"For me the first word of each line!"
(Calls the third hastily after her)
"And with me, dear friend, no hurry,
(Speaks the fourth) and don't shout too much!"
If the prompting is not to the liking of the fifth,
He speaks about it after the performance:
"Tell me, what were you doing down there?
Today you weren't paying attention at all!"]

This rendition of the text in all the various modes required by the actors is linked to the ever-attentive gaze shifting back and forth between what is happening on stage and the prompt book positioned at reading distance from the body. Prompt books thus made for peculiar reading: they were not read line by line, but always between the scene taking place on stage and the scene of writing; prompters were always shifting between reactive and proactive reading, constantly switching between silent or murmuring reading or reading aloud while stuck in a cramped, uncomfortable, and only half-lit space. Depending on what the emergency was, the switch from silent reading to reading in a hushed voice (or the switch from reading to improvising) had to be properly timed.

The actors did not just depend on each other's timing but, above all, on that of the prompt book reader. In the half-light of the prompt box, however, the prompter's reading had to react to the whims of the actors and the uncertainties of their interactions, had to negotiate between them or get ahead of them to put the action on stage back into the order prescribed by the written artefact at hand.[65] The prompter's reading of the prompt book regulated how the action penned down in the written words was converted into action on stage, but in the most complex of manners.

64 Quoted after Ulrich 2008, 222.

65 As John Durham Peters has it, writing is the medium capable of reversing the flow of time. In writing, spoken language is not lost to time but stored and can be revived again (cf. Peters 2015, 261–266). However, a written-down play is a particular beast in this respect. When performed, it does not only reverse time but reconverts that which has been taken out of the flow of time into the duration of the performance.

The lexicons and almanacs of the nineteenth century take it for granted that, as written artefacts, prompt books had to be conducive to such complex reading operations. They therefore largely state truisms but keep silent about the specific affordances of the prompt book. According to the *Allgemeines Theater-Lexikon*, it is "am besten geschrieben und auf jeder Seite mit einem weißen Rande versehen"[66] [best written by hand and has a white margin on each page]. "Wir bemerken hier nur […], daß es jedenfalls auf hartes Papier, deutlich und groß geschrieben, […] sein muß"[67] [We only note here […] that it must in any case be written on hard paper, clearly, and in large letters]. However, such truisms either were not historically true at all or did not smoothly translate into practice. The handwriting in a great number of prompt books at the Theater-Bibliothek is not particularly tidy. Frequently, it appears that readily available print versions were favoured over existing manuscripts as the basis for prompt books.[68]

The entries in the *Allgemeines Theater-Lexikon* have the character of prescriptions or at least wishful thinking. They thus demand meticulous organisation when updating prompt books: "Gewissenhaft muß er im Streichen und Einschieben der Zeichen in das Soufflierbuch sein, um seinem Nachfolger das Geschäft zu erleichtern"[69] [He must be conscientious in crossing out and inserting the symbols in the prompt book to make the business easier for his successor]. In contrast, the entry in Düringer and Barthels seems more grounded in reality. They demand "Schonung der Bücher" [care for the books] as they were "oft zum Erschrecken zerfezt u. so verstrichen […], daß kein Mensch mehr Sinn u. Verstand herausfinden kann" [so ragged and so crisscrossed […] that no-one can make sense of them anymore].[70]

However, the demand for clarity underscores one of the main requirements of prompting: that the prompter did not hesitate, instead making quick decisions about what needed to be read in a perhaps "ragged and crisscrossed" prompt book that they potentially had taken over from someone else. The lexicons record this as the speed and attentiveness of the prompter who had to react to the actors' whims by speedily deciphering the proper text. But vice versa, the actors were also at the mercy of the prompter. It was the latter who made the decisions in the heat of the moment on a given day: "Auf der andern Seite muß der S. wieder so gewissenhaft sein, nicht willkührlich zu springen, entweder aus Bosheit, um einzelne Schausp. in Verlegenheit zu bringen, oder in der Ab-

66 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846a, 36.

67 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 15.

68 Cf. Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1006; cf. our Chapters 5 and 6.

69 Blum/Herloßsohn/Marggraff 1846b, 12.

70 Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1005.

sicht, das Stück umso schneller zu Ende zu bringen, was auch schon da gewesen"[71] [On the other hand, the p.[rompter] must be so conscientious as to not jump arbitrarily, neither out of malice, nor to embarrass individual actors, or with the intention of bringing the play to an end all the more quickly, which is not unheard of]. Instead of ensuring the play could be repeated in exactly the same way every time it was performed, reading from the prompt book became a source of arbitrariness, capriciousness, and even a variation of the despotism Schröder wanted to guard against with his regulations.[72] This might have happened voluntarily or involuntarily as the person in the prompt box might have missed the signs of the actors' failure or might have been anything but quick-witted. In this vein, the *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* of 1845 takes up an anecdote from the Hamburg Stadt-Theater from the late 1810s, which can be found in various publications from the 1820s onwards and seems to have become popular lore:

> Der alte Souffleur Barlow in Hamburg […] war manchmal fast wie geistesabwesend. Eines Tages machte er plötzlich mitten im Stück sein Buch zu und verschwand; zwar entstand eine Stockung, einer der Schauspieler aber fand sich glücklicher Weise, der imstande war, die erledigte Stelle, für den Augenblick wenigstens, zu besetzen. Aber auch dieser verschwand, als er kaum sein Werk aufgenommen hatte, bei den Füßen nämlich von Barlow zu sich herabgezogen, der jetzt ärgerlich vor ihm stand und sagte: "Herr, wenn ich gewollt hätte, dass jemand souffliren sollte, so wäre ich selbst im Kasten geblieben."[73] [The old prompter Barlow in Hamburg […] was sometimes almost absent-minded. One day he suddenly closed his book in the middle of the play and disappeared; there was a hold-up, but, fortunately, an actor was found who was able to fill the vacancy, at least for a moment. But he, too, disappeared before he had scarcely taken up his work, being pulled down by the feet by Barlow, who now stood angrily before him and said: "Sir, if I had wanted someone to do the prompting, I would have stayed in the box myself."]

This example illustrates, in exaggerated fashion, how the supposedly merely auxiliary position of the prompter implied a peculiar position of power: prompters decided whether to help ensure the smooth running of a performance or not, whether to support the actors or not, whether to do their job inconspicuously or to interpret it according to their own whims. The "hold-up" in the example cited

71 Düringer/Barthels 1841, 1005.

72 In the vein of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man, Bettine Menke argues that reading in general operates by creating (rather than deciphering) ever-shifting constellations of meaning, cf. Menke 1993. From this point of view, the reading of prompt books "in the heat of the moment", as it were, extrapolates a broader structure of reading.

73 *Allgemeine Theater-Chronik* 1845a, 248; cf. Schmidt 1875, 139–148; cf. Holzapfel 1823, 113–116.

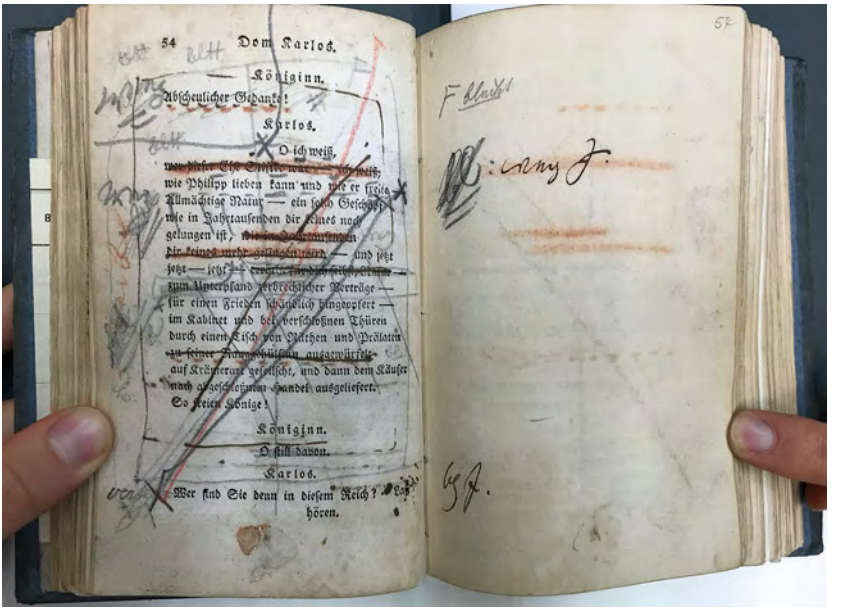
here was not caused by forgotten or messed-up lines, but by the absence of a certain person, without whom nothing seemed to work. The peculiar place occupied by this person comes into view as the dim, much-ridiculed in-between place of the prompter's box. (Barlow's obituary joked that he would now be in the coffin exactly where he had been most alive all his life.[74]) But in his subordination, the prompter Barlow is also a distinctive kind of ruler here. Whoever ventures in (as a substitute prompter) can be pulled down out of the above-ground order altogether. But such power retains a strange status of potentiality; it takes place in the subjunctive and only decrees one thing: that no one else should occupy this space of power: "If I had wanted to, I would have stayed." But only in its absence does the "will" of the prompter manifest itself at all. Barlow's power is capricious in that it only becomes visible when it fails – it only can subvert and disturb the order of the performance it is there to guarantee. As long as prompters did their job, they did not seem very important or powerful at all.

Once more, the part that written artefacts played in prompting is ignored in this anecdote. However, the anecdote still accounts for the precarity, power, and capriciousness of the prompter, as they left material traces in the actual written artefacts. The frequently crossed-out lines had to be deciphered on the spot by this one person who made instant decisions about what was actually written there. Weeks, months, or years after the creation or last use of the prompt book, the prompter had to decipher corrections made some time ago by their own or an alien hand. Whenever a performance was put in jeopardy by a crisis of forgotten or mangled lines, the prompter became the prompt book's autocratic reader – and was simultaneously at its mercy.

For outsiders or twenty-first-century readers like the authors of this study, prompt books can develop their very own pull due to their striking visual features. Artefacts that, in the context of their time, were designed to ensure the repeatability of the text in question sometimes take an idiosyncratic turn or simply remain illegible – and not (only) because the material has been worn down by time, a pencil has faded, or one's knowledge of *Kurrent*, i.e., German cursive is not good enough. The text and the corrections made to it were sometimes jotted down fleetingly. The writing seems almost private and is certainly hard to decipher if not done regularly. In the heat of the moment, the prompt book reader has to make a tough call – make a call on a whim – as to what a certain line or word is supposed to mean and whether it means anything at all (cf. figure 6).

74 Cf. Schmidt 1875, 142.

*Figure 6:* Theater-Bibliothek 1989b, 54.




The next chapters will delve into some of the written artefacts from the Hamburg Stadt-Theater collection, the Theater-Bibliothek, in order to demonstrate how these written artefacts were created in order to ensure the repeatability of a given text during a performance. However, these chapters will also frequently point to the unpredictable aspects that emerged in the everyday use of prompt books by prompters.