I would like to begin this chapter with what is likely an unremarkable moment early in *Hamlet*, or, more accurately, with what is likely an unremarkable textual moment from Harold Jenkins’s Arden edition of the play (1982). As planned, Hamlet meets Horatio and Marcellus “Upon the platform 'twixt eleven and twelve” (1.2.252); chilled by “a nipping and an eager air” (1.4.2), the company waits with nervous anticipation for the Ghost of King Hamlet to appear. In the midst of their attempts to establish the precise time of night, we are given this stage direction: “A flourish of trumpets, and two pieces of ordnance go off.” If we, like Horatio, are confused by the flourish and cannon fire, Hamlet reminds us that Claudius had earlier promised this revelling, and the sudden noises “thus bray out / The triumph of his pledge” (1.4.11–12). Now consider Jenkins’s commentary note: “It is with an effective irony—which perhaps the audience does not always note—that the cannon by which Claudius celebrates Hamlet’s staying on in Denmark are heard by Hamlet at the very moment when he waits for his father’s ghost.” The note continues: “And the echoes of the new King’s revelry will still be in our ears when the ghost of the King he has murdered tells how he got the crown.”

I begin with this moment because of the way in which Jenkins attempts to reconcile reading and theater audiences, to engage with both text and performance. He first makes an implicit distinction between readers and theater-goers: a theater audience might not always pick up on the irony of Claudius’s riotous celebration, but Jenkins is able to highlight the matter for you, the reader, as you diligently
navigate the margins of his text. Jenkins then seems to conflate readers with theater audiences when he claims that the cannons will still be echoing in “our ears” when the ghost of the dead King begins his tale of murder most foul. Readers and spectators become indistinguishable in Jenkins’s note, a point that brings with it several implications: Jenkins is suggesting that we can synaesthetically “hear” these cannons as we read (to the extent that they continue to echo 100 or so lines after they first sound), that we as readers can thus partially experience the text of the play as if it were a staged performance, and that such an experience is enabled, at least in part, by his editorial mediations. It is precisely this kind of editorial gesture that this chapter takes as its focus: the impossible attempt to describe or return to the forever-absent play-as-performed.

Rememberings and citations of performance in the margins of critical editions constitute a form of editorial work that, until very recently, has not been subjected to much critical scrutiny. John Russell Brown is among those who have begun to survey the intersections of page and stage as they appear in performance commentary, and he provides a useful summary of the intrinsic limitations of editorial gestures toward the play as it has been, or could be, performed:

...no-one can possibly annotate all that has, could, or should happen on stage: the possibilities are infinite, the effects fleeting. Editors can describe a moment in particular performances by quoting brief eyewitness accounts but this involves ruthlessly selecting from among available evidence and presenting it without reference to the moment’s place in an entire performance and, usually, without regard for the cultural viewpoint and personal prejudice of the witness. Alternatively, an editor may describe an imaginary performance in terms of movements on stage and physical actions that seem to be called for by the words of the text, although such a speculative account can provide no more than a disembodied staging, more like a diagram than a theatrical happening, a map than a terrain. All these modes of annotation take a reader only a little distance towards a play’s theatrical potential and deal with it in fragmentary and abbreviated form. (“Annotating” 157–8)

Brown, aware that performance commentary can potentially misrepresent the plurality of performance possibilities, nevertheless concedes that despite the ways in which the seemingly limitless, fleeting effects of performance are inevitably decontextualized, “disembodied,” “fragment[ed] and abbreviated” when recounted by editors, readers