'Caviare to the general'?: Taste, Hearing, and Genre in *Hamlet*
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“Caviare to the general”?:
Taste, Hearing, and Genre in *Hamlet*

**Allison K. Deutermann**

In *A Short View of Tragedy*, Thomas Rymer famously glosses a speech from *Othello*, “So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call’d the Tragedy of the Handkerchief? What can be more absurd?” His complaint introduces a nonetheless serious critical claim about Shakespeare’s play which, as Natasha Korda puts it, “manifests an obsessive concern with the whereabouts of a hankie.” This essay argues that *Hamlet* could be accused of a similarly “absurd” attention to ears. Subjected throughout to poisonings both figurative and literal, the ears of kings, queens, princes, ladies of the court, and courtiers prove supremely vulnerable organs, situated at the threshold between the body and its environment. Ears are stabbed with verbal “dagg[ers],” filled with poison, “abused” by rumor, and “assail[ed]” with stories (3.2.386, 1.5.38, 1.1.30). But *Hamlet* is “absurd” in a different sense as well. Derived from the French *surdus*, meaning “deaf, inaudible, insufferable to the ear,” the term “absurd” invites consideration of theatrical speech and its reception, topics with which *Hamlet* seems to be almost obsessively occupied.

Much has been written about *Hamlet’s* interest in the risks listening entailed; recently, critics have begun to turn their attention to the physical, material quality of those risks. This work has enhanced our understanding of Shakespeare’s play, but by divorcing itself from the study of dramatic form it has left...

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I am grateful to Jean E. Howard and Alan Stewart, as well as to the anonymous readers, for their detailed and invaluable comments and suggestions.

3 Here and throughout, unless otherwise noted, I refer to Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor’s modernized edition of the 1604 Q2 *Hamlet* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006). Rather than work with a conflated edition that we know was never staged and did not exist in the seventeenth century, I have chosen the text scholars tend to agree was produced from Shakespeare’s foul papers.
unexplored a crucial aspect of Hamlet’s attention to hearing—its intervention in a turn-of-the-century debate over how particular kinds of plays should sound and how they should be heard by their audiences.6 Key to this metadramatic contest are an assumption of sound’s materiality and a set of contradictory models of auditory reception. Early modern anatomists describe sound as an object or force capable of working profound physiological effects on its listeners. Noise slips inside the ear, or “hole of hearing,” and progresses ever more deeply inside the self, passing from the outer ear to the auditory canal and finally into the “after-braine” and memory.7 At each stage, sound presses upon the body and re-forms the corporeal material with which it comes into contact. The act of hearing is consequently imagined as a somatic transformation over which the listener has only tenuous control. And yet these same anatomical texts also stress the ear’s ability to deflect and moderate sounds, implying that listeners can select what they hear and determine how deeply they are affected by it. Such contradictions matter crucially for early modern thinking about language and, by extension, theatrical speech, which might be imagined either as sound that penetrates the self regardless of its content or as something that can be sampled and selected according to its sense.8 In fact, theatrical speech is always both at once. It is sound, a material object, but it is also a source of meaning that theatergoers are charged with interpreting and negotiating in complex and sometimes competing ways.

This process of negotiation was a central topic in early modern theater, but it receives special scrutiny in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century

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6 For an exploration of how this debate and the contradictory models of audition on which it depends shaped The Tempest, see Allison Kay Deutermann, “Repeat to me the words of the Echo: Listening to The Tempest,” in Knowing Shakespeare: Senses, Embodiment, and Cognition, ed. Lowell Gallagher and Shankar Raman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 172–91.

7 Helkiah Crooke, Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man. Together with the Controversies Thereto Belonging (London, 1615), sigs. Ccc5r–Fff6v; the “hole of hearing” is introduced at sig. Ccc6v; the “after-braine” is discussed at sig. Ss4r.

8 I use the term “sense” here as it is deployed by philosophers of language, who distinguish between the sense, or meaning, of a given phrase and its reference, as well as the phonemes out of which it is composed. See Peter Geach and Max Black, eds., Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952).
plays of Ben Jonson, John Marston, and other playwrights. At issue for these authors is how sound sometimes threatens to trump sense in the theater. Their plays repeatedly accuse older dramatic forms, revenge tragedy most of all, of featuring thunderous speeches that subject listeners to dangerous somatic processes, opening up their bodies to the indiscriminate reception of theatrical language. Their turn-of-the-century comedies, by contrast, claim to introduce a new sound to London’s stages that is more measured and less booming. Most importantly, this new sound is described as affecting listeners differently. Older plays bore into audiences’ bodies, but the comedies of Jonson and Marston allow audiences to choose what they hear according to the sense of what is said.

All of this matters crucially for Hamlet, a play that not only takes hearing as one of its subjects but that does so from within the genre of revenge.\(^9\) Shakespeare’s play directly responds to Jonson’s complaints about revenge tragedy’s rumbling sound and its supposedly inevitable, somatically transformative reception. Instead, Hamlet insists that all theatrical speeches can be absorbed voluntarily, regardless of their style, and questions the criteria by which listeners’ choices are to be made. If Jonson describes social status as the main determinant of listeners’ choices, Hamlet gives the lie to that assumption, emphasizing instead the morality or rationality of a given speech. The play therefore introduces an alternative model of theatrical audition to the early modern stage while recuperating this long-popular dramatic form from charges of creaking irrelevance. Hamlet’s tragedy is one of Jonsonian listening run amok. The mistakes he makes as a listener, coupled with the assumptions that he holds about others’ reception, determine the play’s action; together they lead inexorably to the fatal silencing of Hamlet himself and to the installation of Fortinbras on the Danish throne. At the same time, Hamlet’s investigation of hearing entails the transformation of one of the oldest dramatic forms on the London stage. From an outmoded but still-popular genre, preoccupied with the violent effects of audition and the instability of corporeal and political bodies that violence signifies, revenge tragedy is remade into a genre attuned to the individual’s struggle to protect the self against aural and other onslaughts.

\(^9\) Although the existence of “revenge tragedy” as a generic category is a modern invention, this does not mean that early modern actors, authors, and audiences would have been unable to distinguish plays that feature vengeance from those that do not. Many of the tragedies in which revenge figures most centrally share other features as well, including the representation of sound as a weapon. I will return to this point below.
That *Hamlet* is preoccupied with ears and hearing has become a critical commonplace; so, too, has Hamlet’s preoccupation with acting and the theater. The prince’s interactions with the players unite these two concerns. When the troupe arrives in Elsinore, the theater—more specifically, turn-of-the-century English theater—briefly becomes *Hamlet*’s subject. While the traveling players’ performance is both oral and gestural, its aural elements resonate most deeply with Hamlet. He remembers having “heard” the First Player, as Aeneas, deliver a speech, and he asks to hear it again; he says he’ll hear the rest of that broken-off speech later (“I’ll have thee speak out the rest of this soon”); and he announces he’ll have the court “hear a play” tomorrow (2.2.459–60, 471–72). Alarmed by one boy actor’s newly grown beard, Hamlet is at least as worried about his voice: “Lady and mistress! . . . Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not cracked within the ring” (ll. 365–66). A cracked voice would ruin the boy’s ability to perform women’s roles as surely as a beard or an ungainly growth spurt, indicating the centrality of sound to Hamlet’s understanding of the theatrical project. This interest in how actors sound is displayed again in Hamlet’s advice to the players: “Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you—trippingly on the tongue” (3.2.1–2). Rather than bellowing their speeches, Hamlet encourages the players to pronounce their lines trippingly, or lightly, for the benefit of “judicious” hearers like himself (l. 26).

Typically read as a critique of non-naturalistic acting, Hamlet’s advice to the players can also be understood as a metadramatic inside joke. Through these scenes, Shakespeare references a turn-of-the-century fad for skewering a particular theatrical sound, which was becoming associated with certain kinds of plays—revenge tragedies, heroic romances, and other older but still popular forms. Shakespeare participated in this fad in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when he mocked Bottom’s enthusiasm for a part to “tear a cat in.” But

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its central participants were John Marston and Ben Jonson. The prince’s criticism of players who “tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings” (3.2.9–10) points not only to Bottom’s tear-cat speeches, but also to Marston’s complaints in *Jacke Drum’s Entertainment* (performed 1599 and 1600) about “mouldy fopperies of stale Poetry” that “torment your listening eares.”\(^{13}\) Perhaps even more than Marston, Hamlet ventriloquizes Ben Jonson, whose comedies persistently mock older dramatic forms, particularly revenge tragedies, for their thunderous sound. Matheo, the pretentious fop of Jonson’s *Every Man in His Humor* (first performed 1598), so admires the “fine speeches” of Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* that he reads them aloud, gushing over their literary merit: “Oh eyes, no eyes, but fountains fraught with tears!—There’s a conceit! Fountains fraught with tears!”\(^{14}\) He concludes, “Is’t not simply the best that ever you heard?”\(^{15}\) And in *Poetaster*, which was first performed either the same year as *Hamlet* or the year after, the gruff soldier Tucca commands his servants to perform a pastiche of his favorite plays, including an unnamed (or unspecific) revenge tragedy (“Vindicta!” / “Timoria!” / “Vindicta!” / “Timoria!”) and a burlesque of *The Spanish Tragedy*.\(^{16}\) He insists his servant “mouth” these lines in the very way Hamlet detests: “Now thunder, sirrah, you, the rumbling player.”\(^{17}\) Like the players who “tear a passion to tatters,” Tucca’s servant bellows his rumbling speech in the manner of *Hamlet*’s “town-crier” (3.2.3). This theatrical sound is mocked in *Poetaster* and other satiric comedies. It synecdochically stands for outdated, unsophisticated drama, the kind of production which, Jonson’s play self-servingly suggests, is the distinct opposite of *Poetaster* itself—a cutting-edge play with a cutting-edge sound.\(^{18}\)


\(^{15}\) Jonson, *Every Man in His Humor*, 1.3.134–35.


\(^{17}\) Jonson, *Poetaster*, 3.4.206.

\(^{18}\) That Hamlet here speaks for Jonson is made clearer in Q1 and the Folio, where the prince’s exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about the approaching actors is expanded. In Q1, Hamlet asks, “How comes it that [the players] trauell?” Gilderstone explains, “the principall publike audience that / Came to them, are turned to priuate playes, / And to the humour of chil-
The opposition Jonson draws between these two styles is an aesthetic one, but it is understood largely in physiological terms. For Jonson, rumbling stage speech inevitably demands unthinking and involuntary reception, while lines that are more trippingly pronounced allow for the possibility of selective engagement. Like Ben Jonson or John Marston, Hamlet finds certain stage sounds embarrassing, even painful, to hear: “O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings” (3.2.8–10). The physical discomfort produced by these sounds in the moment of their reception is the inevitable byproduct of their power, meaning both their volume and their strength. There is support for such thinking in early modern anatomy texts. While the ear is structurally designed to protect the brain from the most damaging of sounds, which Helkiah Crooke describes as “vehement and violent noyse such as the shooting of ordnance, thunder & such like,” it cannot prevent these noises from entering the body altogether. Thunderous sounds, including certain kinds of speech, could thus be absorbed through the ear involuntarily and at great risk to the listener.

If this understanding of theatrical audition echoes complaints made by Jonson and Marston, it also complements Hamlet’s representations of hearing as a potentially violent, dangerous act. Verbs like “split” and “cleave” suggest that sound opens up a wound in the hearer’s body, allowing words to pour in unmediated, regardless of their sense. Represented most famously, and most gruesomely, in the description of King Hamlet’s murder, this model of audition associates words with poison and suggests that listeners do not always have control over what they hear. The “juice of cursed hebona in a vial” poured “in the porches” of the sleeping King’s ear resembles the false rumors circulating about the King’s death, rumors by which “the whole ear of Denmark” is “rankly abused” (1.5.62–63, 36, 38). Words threaten to damage their hearers in the play’s opening scenes, as the Ghost warns that “the secrets of [his] prison-house” would “harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood” if Hamlet were to hear them (ll. 14–16). Sound’s invasion thus signals the vulnerability of Hamlet’s political and corporeal bodies, a conceit familiar from The Spanish Tragedy, and one that would become increasingly central to the action of seventeenth-century revenge plays.

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Helkiah Crooke, sig. Dddv.

Since *Hamlet* is a tragedy of revenge, its emphasis on sound’s power to wound makes generic sense. And indeed, Hamlet himself often speaks in the ear-splitting style he derides. After hearing the First Player perform, he bellows, “bloody, bawdy villain, / Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain” and aches to “cleave the general ear with horrid speech” (2.2.515–16, 498). What are we to make, then, of Hamlet’s excoriating attacks on thunderous theater? These complaints seem not only to echo but also to form part of Shakespeare’s response to Jonson’s skewering of revenge tragedy. Embedded in this response is the play’s critique of Jonson’s theories of theatrical audition—how it works and how it matters. For the prince, as for Jonson, auditory reception is predetermined by how a play sounds and, paradoxically, shaped by a theatergoer’s social status. Certain listeners are better able to resist sound’s effects and to make choices according to the sense of what they hear. The problem is that the process of making these choices becomes, both for Hamlet and for Jonson (but not, I will argue, for Shakespeare), above all a socially significant one. It reveals where a listener fits within a hierarchy of elite and less privileged hearers or, alternatively, signals affiliations with other kinds of social groups—male or female, guilty or innocent. This model of audition ultimately proves insufficient in *Hamlet* for combating the very real dangers attached to the absorption of certain speeches, or for anticipating how people will be affected by what they hear.

For all of Hamlet’s complaints about ear-splitting speeches that “rankly abuse” the body or “cleave the ear,” it is clear that he does not expect to be affected by theatrical language in this way. Nor is the violent, involuntary audition Hamlet and the Ghost describe the only model of hearing encountered in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Noises can damage vulnerable hearers, but they can also be ignored, deflected, or selectively sampled by active listeners. This last model of audition, which is just as central to *Hamlet* as the one discussed above, has received far less attention in scholars’ discussion of this play. At its core is the possibility of choice, a way of imagining aural consumption as informed by aesthetic, spiritual, and social concerns. For Hamlet, these aural choices—and, just as importantly, one’s demonstrated ability to make them in the first place—become expressive of the possession or lack of social polish, status, and refinement. In short, they become expressive of taste. The concept of “taste” as aesthetic discernment has been assumed to be anachronistic to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, a product instead of eighteenth-century thought. Yet we can already see

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21 Bloom is an important exception to this rule, although her attention to “resistant hearing” is tied to the romances rather than to *Hamlet* (111–59).

22 George Dickie calls the eighteenth century “the century of taste” and claims it was during this period that authors shifted their focus from “objective notions of beauty” to subjective ones.
TASTE, HEARING, AND GENRE IN HAMLET

this abstracted sense developing in Hamlet’s synaesthetic language: “We’ll have a speech straight,” he commands; “Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech” (2.2.368–70). “Taste” here means a small sample, or tidbit, to be examined, weighed, and judged. This judging will be performed by the ear, an organ that tastes and swallows words like the mouth tastes and swallows food:

I heard thee speak me a speech once—but it was never acted, or, if it was, not above once, for the play I remember pleased not the million, ’twas caviare to the general. But it was, as I received it, and others whose judgements in such matters cried in the top of mine, an excellent play, well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning. I remember one said there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savoury nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection, but called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine.

(ll. 372–83)

Likened to “caviare,” this “well-digested” play lacks “sallets,” or spices, that might make it “savoury.” At the same time, it is both “wholesome” and “sweet.” Described in the language of gustatory taste, these choices link aural and aesthetic palates in the development of a socially significant critical faculty. Enjoying the caviar-like speech of a particular player, Hamlet seems to appreciate most of all its unsuitability for others’ palates and the consequent distinction it affords his own. Those of “general” tastes include no less a personage than Polonius, the King’s counselor, who finds the whole speech “too long” and savors only the one line Hamlet seems to dislike (“The mobled queen!”), saying, “That’s good” (ll. 441–42). Polonius’s theatrical palate is thus set in opposition to Hamlet’s and


24 Thompson and Taylor gloss “sallets” as “salads,” noting the term is “usually glossed as ‘spicy bits’”; they suggest instead the term could be used to refer to “just a variety of ingredients,” 266n. Either way, Shakespeare’s use of the term suggests flavoring, or spice, in a “well-seasoned” piece of dialogue.

25 The distinction in reception is clearer in Q1 and F than in Q2. Q2 has Hamlet echo “The mobled queen” while Polonius chimes in, “That’s good.” The Folio replaces “mobled” with “inobled” and punctuates Hamlet’s echo with a question mark (“The innobled Queene?”) that in early modern printing practice could signal either a question or an exclamation. Q1 and the Folio also extend Polonius’s response into the more fatuous “That’s good, Mobled Queene is good” (2.2.441–42n). This extended response is more ridiculous and suggests that Hamlet’s echo, unlike Polonius’s, is less than enthusiastic.
subordinated to it: “Prithee say on,” the prince commands, “he’s for a jig, or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps” (ll. 437–38).  

Gustatory metaphors for the discerning, synaesthetic reception of sounds also appear in contemporary Puritan sermons, suggesting that this abstracted sense of taste was already forming at the start of the seventeenth century. William Cowper writes in *Anatomie of a Christian Man* that “as the mouth tastes the meat, and lets none goe downe to the stomack, vnlesse it be approued; so the eare of the godly tastes words, and lets none goe downe to the soule which is not from God.” Cowper encourages Christians to hear both profitably and discriminatingly, a process that depends on being able to gauge the difference between essential sounds and those which must be winnowed. This skill was always at risk of being misapplied. Richard Crooke rails against “the nice or itching Eare . . . that will heare nothing but nouelties, and dainties, that lookes not so much to the goodnesse of the meat, as to the sweetnesse of the sawce.” Nice or itching ears do not just hear the wrong sorts of sounds—attending to theatrical productions, say, instead of to sermons—they also hear the right words the wrong way, sampling the sauce without savoring the meat. Such a listener “often meets with that hee vnderstandeth not, meate that hee cannot digest, and so seldom or neuer profitteth by the Word of God.” The problem is that writers like Richard Crooke and Cowper simultaneously, if inadvertently, encourage the use of just such a nice or itching ear by training listeners in its cultivation. When Stephen Egerton suggests that individuals read along in their Bibles while the minister recites scripture, “to see whether they be truly alleaged or no,” he fosters the development of a critical ear, one attentive to how well the minister reads or recites the Bible. The application of one sort of critical filter might lead to the use of another: the scripture is accurate, but the sermon is boring; the minister’s voice is nasal.

Written roughly twenty years before Egerton’s sermon was published and ten years before Cowper’s, *Hamlet* nevertheless seems to share these authors’ understanding of the ear as, first, the organ of salvation; and, second, as a tool for

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26 Compare Polonius’s earlier critique of the “vile phrase” in Hamlet’s letter (“most beautified Ophelia”) (2.2.108–9). Here, too, differences in taste may be established, although it seems more likely that Polonius is reacting to the insult embedded in Hamlet’s phrasing.  
29 Crooke, in Egerton, *Boring of the Eare*, sig. A5r.  
exercising aesthetic discernment. I suggest it also shares their discomfort with this dual function—not just as applied to religious material, but also as applied to a wide variety of sounds, including those of the stage. Scholars attuned to Hamlet's emphasis on ears and hearing have tended to consider the play within a Protestant context, arguing that it participates in a post-Reformation shift from the holy images of Catholicism to the word of God.\textsuperscript{31} First performed in an ostensibly Protestant culture that legally required weekly attendance of church services, with their hour-long sermons, Hamlet's emphasis on audition certainly seems religiously resonant. Without arguing for a strictly Protestant, let alone Puritan, reading of Hamlet, I nonetheless want to suggest that the play criticizes Hamlet's hearing as being superficial in its critical focus and dangerously inattentive to the serious stakes of audition—in any setting, and under any circumstances.

Such a reading troubles easy identification of Hamlet's thoughts on hearing with Shakespeare's. Instead, like his polemic against rumbling stage speech, Hamlet's stated preference for tasteful audition seems to echo that of Ben Jonson, who often used synaesthetic language to describe the discriminating reception of sound and who would emphasize the discerning auditor's social distinction throughout his career. Jonson's persistent use of these classically inflected metaphors suggests their new and specifically contemporary significance, particularly with regard to theatrical reception.\textsuperscript{32} The first of Jonson's plays to be performed on the commercial stage, \textit{The Case Is Altered}, describes speech in edible terms, likening old maxims to stale bread.\textsuperscript{33} When the servant Juniper adopts the habit (or humor) of speaking neologisms and other hard words, the more articulate Valentine's complaint ("O how pitifully are these words forc't. / As though they were pumpt out on's belly") both communicates his own more elevated position in the household, since he is able to hear misusages Jupiter cannot, and signals to the Blackfriars audience that they, too, should listen for malapropisms in the servant's speech.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Cynthia's Revels} (first performed in 1600) likens one boy actor's


\textsuperscript{34} Jonson, \textit{Case Is Altered}, 1.4.18–19. The same play also offers an important reminder that ears could literally be made into markers of status, bored to indicate one occupied a position
willful delivery of the argument to “giv[ing] them [the audience] the inuentorie of their cates aforehand,” or to reading the audience the menu of the meal they are about to enjoy.\(^{35}\) The prologue to *Epicoene* (first performed 1609 or 1610) likens the poet’s words to “cates,” claiming, “Our wishes, like to those make public feasts, / Are not to please the cook’s tastes, but the guests.”\(^{36}\) And *The Staple of News* (first performed 1625) explains in a separate prologue for the court that the play is meant for “Schollers, that can iudge, and faire report / The sense they heare, aboue the vulgar sort / Of Nut-crackers, that onely come for sight.”\(^{37}\) Like the scholars who hear “sense” where the vulgar nutcrackers do not, Hamlet imagines his aural choices distinguishing him from those without the taste for caviar. Both the meaning of Hamlet’s metaphors and the metaphors themselves could be taken straight from one of Ben Jonson’s comedies. But where *The Case Is Altered, Cynthia’s Revels, Epicoene*, and *The Staple of News* all bear out the social logic of this tasteful audition, *Hamlet* does not. By interpolating Jonson’s stance on theatrical reception into his own turn-of-the-century revenge play, and by putting that position in the mouth of its eponymous hero, Shakespeare tests the limits of this approach from within the much-maligned revenge tragedy form.

Shifting the focus of the debate from theatrical pronunciation (rumbling versus tripping, ranting versus well seasoned) to its reception, *Hamlet* implies that why playgoers hear is every bit as important as what, or even how, they hear. What matters most are the criteria by which those auditory choices are made.

### II. Hamlet’s Hearing

For all of *Hamlet’s*, and Hamlet’s, focus on audition, the prince has surprisingly persistent trouble hearing. His mistakes as a listener are not only thematically central but also key to the plotting of Shakespeare’s play. It is because Hamlet has failed to hear (or, as a listener, failed to focus on) the Ghost’s command in Act 1, “Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught,” that he speaks “words like daggers” to Gertrude in Act 3, causing Polonius to cry out from behind the arras and precipitating the first in a series of what will then become inevitable acts of violence (1.5.85–86, 3.4.93). Mishearings like these help determine the play’s tragic ending, leading inexorably to the prince’s death and the dissolution of Denmark’s royal line. Their persistent presence and centrality to the plot undermine the prince’s, and hence Jonson’s,

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authority on sound’s reception. Rather than endorsing the ear-splitting sound and indiscriminate reception that both Hamlet and Jonson mock, or the tripping pronunciation and tasteful reception they celebrate, Hamlet suggests that both ways of hearing are insufficient for negotiating Denmark’s soundscapes. Instead, an altogether new auditory model is needed.

Hamlet’s opening act establishes the hearing trouble the prince will have throughout the play. When he first encounters the Ghost, Hamlet begins by attempting to frame his reception in much the way Cowper, Richard Crooke, and Egerton encourage, asking it questions to judge whether or not this speaker can be heard with moral safety: “Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned, / Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell” (1.4.40–41). And yet, famously, Hamlet does not wait for the answers to these questions, choosing instead to supply them himself: “I’ll call thee Hamlet, / King, father, royal Dane” (ll. 44–45). This choice exposes the prince to grave spiritual and physical risks, potentially placing him in the category of those who allow sounds to “goe downe to the soule which [are] not from God.” Yet Hamlet does not entirely surrender to this speaker’s power. He distances himself from the Ghost once again by using the pronoun “it” (“It will not speak: then I will follow it” [l.63]), and he sets limits to his obedience by refusing to follow the Ghost beyond a particular point on the ramparts. On the one hand, the Ghost’s story affects Hamlet strongly, causing him to feel as if he is bursting: “Hold, hold, my heart, / And you, my sinews, grow not instant old / But bear me swiftly up” (1.5.93–95). On the other hand, it does not produce in the prince the transformation that the Ghost seeks or indeed that Hamlet promises to undergo. Focusing his aural attention on the wrong information, he most indelibly “marks” that on which he is expressly told not to dwell: the fact of Gertrude’s remarriage. This is dangerously indiscriminate reception.

So crucial to the rest of the play, this scene introduces hearing as a central subject while at the same time signaling Hamlet’s failings as a listener. His initial overeagerness to hear the Ghost’s story becomes offset by a protective inattentiveness that prevents him from focusing on and remembering the Ghost’s command, a morally ambiguous but generically crucial call for vengeance. If the opening act draws attention to Hamlet’s hearing trouble, however, it also highlights a more positive model of auditory reception. Hamlet’s mistakes are 38

offset by the comparatively thoughtful, measured audition of Horatio, one of the prince’s several foils in the play. Neither indiscriminate nor determined by taste, Horatio’s listening presents an alternative to the two dominant auditory modes at play in turn-of-the-century English theater: it is cautious, thoughtful, and always directed to the specific circumstances in which each act of hearing takes place. Like the prince a “scholar” educated at Wittenberg (Martin Luther’s university, and hence coded as a site of Protestant learning), Horatio seems to have learned the lessons taught there better than Hamlet has. He attends to speeches—theatrical and otherwise—with a skeptically “fortified” ear (1.1.41, 31). Because Horatio is something of a bystander, limited in the scope of his action, he cannot make mistakes on as grand or tragic a scale as the prince, and he is thus both protected and limited by his role. As cautious in action as Horatio is, he is similarly cautious in his hearing, a trait that is key to his comparative identification with the prince. For example, Horatio “will not let belief take hold of him” about the Ghost on report alone (l. 23). Only firsthand, empirical evidence, rather than Marcellus and Barnardo’s report, will convince Horatio that the dead King Hamlet stalks Elsinore’s ramparts. He demands to “speak to” the Ghost, questioning it and considering its responses before deciding whether to accept the watch’s story (ll. 128, 131). His discerning ear samples speeches for more than how they sound, considering their sense, provenance, and verifiability before choosing how or even whether to mark them.

As is demonstrated by Horatio’s repeated willingness to hear Marcellus and Barnardo, however, he limits only his acceptance of what he hears—not his reception more generally. Simply put, Horatio hears as much as he can, but accepts only certain material. To hear becomes an ongoing process of filtering and sifting stories, rumors, news, and other sounds. This is the kind of thoughtful audition Hamlet repeatedly fails to perform, and that the play suggests would best protect him from the aural onslaughts of literally and figuratively poisonous speech that are synonymous with the revenge tragedy form. Skeptical of the watch’s story, Horatio nevertheless asks to “let us hear Barnardo speak of” the Ghost again, collecting information without necessarily approving or accepting it (l. 33). He listens to, remembers, and repeats to Marcellus and Barnardo rumors of an imminent attack on Denmark, but he is cautious about accepting these rumors as true: “At least the whisper goes so” (l. 79). Horatio seems capable of determining not just whether or not, but how deeply, he should hear. He often accepts speeches only “in part,” judging the worth of individual pieces of discourse while practicing a sort of layered, even inductive, audition. “I have heard,” Horatio explains, that “The cock . . . is the trumpet to the morn,” frightening away spirits with its cry; “and of the truth herein / This present object made probation” (ll. 148–55). Having heard the cock crow and seen the Ghost depart,
Horatio now believes what he has heard about roosters: the specific example has proven the general rule. That the cock sings all night long at Christmas, and no ghosts walk abroad that night (as Marcellus next insists), Horatio remains skeptical: “So have I heard and do in part believe it” (l. 164, emphasis added). He hears Marcellus’s theory, considers it, and stores it, but he does so with qualifications. Using the particular to prove the general, Horatio is able to absorb more information and to make wiser, sounder judgments as a result.

Such cautious hearing complements traditional readings of Horatio as a Christian Stoic, since his carefully managed audition could be seen as part of a larger project of self-control.39 But Horatio’s hearing is Stoic in a different sense as well. It seems to represent a practical extension of the theories of language described by Diogenes Laertius, Seneca, and others that distinguished between the corporeality of speech and the incorporeality of meaning, or sense.40 The Stoics understood all utterances, including speech, to be corporeal. Composed of air, itself a material substance, speech was capable (like all other “bodies”) of acting upon matter or of being acted upon. By contrast, meaning, or “sayables” (lekta), subsist but have no bodily form. This distinction enables listeners, at least theoretically, to manage speech’s impact on their own bodies, deciding how fully or how deeply it is allowed to matter. Stoic logic demands such sifting. In its breadth, it encompasses all aspects of discourse—phonetics, semantics, stylistics, and so on—and provides a linguistic framework for evaluating the truth of what the Stoics termed “assertibles,” a class of sayable.41 It is the context in which an assertible is spoken that largely determines its truth. For example, the assertible “it is day” may be true right now, but it will not be true this evening; it will again be true tomorrow.42 Attentive to the circumstances in which speech is delivered as well as to its meaning, Horatio sifts sounds in ways that seem in keeping with Stoic logic.

Like Horatio’s stoicism more generally, which Hamlet admires but is unable to put into practice for much of the play, his cautious reception eludes the prince. Hamlet—the play’s great theorizer on the subject of audition—hears far less


42 The example is taken from Diogenes Laertius, The Lives of the Philosophers, 7:65, quoted in Long and Sedley, 203.
successfully in practice than Horatio. In addition to mishearing certain sounds, the prince also mistakenly assumes that all individuals will hear predictably and by rule. His underestimation of other listeners’ discrimination matters because it shapes his interactions with the men and women of the Danish court and prevents him from interpreting their auditory responses correctly. This second point will have important implications for Hamlet’s use of the theater in his plot against Claudius, to which I will turn below, but it affects the prince’s other exchanges as well. By assuming audition is categorically predetermined, Hamlet aligns himself with the mainly Puritan authors who produced a sharply gendered schematic in which all women were imagined to hear more indiscriminately than most men. The faultiness of such assumptions forms part of Hamlet’s critique of Jonsonian reception. As feminist critics have shown, the goal of controlling the unruly female body became tied in early modern England to managing what that body said and heard. \(^43\) Shakespeare undermines such rigidly gendered ways of thinking by giving them voice through Polonius and Laertes; Laertes’ identification of Ophelia’s “credent ear” and “chaste treasure” renders his harangue against her an incestuous assault and undercuts his moral authority (1.3.29–30). Hamlet also expects groups of listeners to hear by rule, but the key term for him is rank rather than gender. He considers his own tasteful audition, an ability to appreciate that which seems “caviare to the general,” a mark of his birth and education. Similarly, he imagines his supposed imperviousness to sound’s violent effects, a quality he boasts of possessing, as being tied to social privilege. When Rosencrantz asks Hamlet the “cause of [his] distemper,” he explains he “lack[s] advancement” and asks Guildenstern to “play upon this pipe” (3.2.328–29, 331, 342–43). “It is as easy as lying,” he urges, “give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music” (ll. 349–51). Guildenstern insists he cannot play, at which point Hamlet explodes:

Why, look you now how unworthy a thing you make of me: you would play upon me! You would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ. Yet cannot you make it speak. ‘Sblood! Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you fret me you cannot play upon me.

(ll. 355–63)

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The analogy creates a sharp distinction between two sets of individuals: those who can be played, or “sounded,” like a pipe, and those who cannot. At issue is one’s receptivity to words’ material effects. Unlike those who resemble an instrument in their willingness to be sounded by others, Hamlet insists he can hear words without being forced to “discourse.” The physiological distinction—between aural openness and pliability, on the one hand, and selectivity and self-control on the other—suggests a social one as well.

Hamlet’s musical metaphor once again echoes the metadramatic conversations discussed above and further links Hamlet to Ben Jonson. Fools in Every Man in His Humor are likened to instruments upon which others can play: Prospero says of Stephano, a gull, “Oh, it’s a precious good fool . . . I can compare him to nothing more happily than a barber’s virginals; for everyone may play upon him.” Prospero demonstrates his ability to dominate another man by “play[ing] upon” Stephano—that is, saying things to him that compel Stephano in turn to say foolish things. By controlling Stephano’s speech, and hence his entire body, through the ear, Prospero establishes a corporeal and sociological distinction between them. Though the instrument has changed (a pipe, rather than a barber’s virginals), Hamlet’s metaphorical meaning is similar to Prospero’s. What makes Guildenstern’s request for information so insulting is that it associates Hamlet with those who have little or no control over their aural reception, and hence over their bodies. Like Polonius or Laertes, or like a wit in one of Jonson’s satiric comedies, Hamlet espouses a model of audition through which individuals are lumped into social categories according to what, and how, they hear: rumbling speeches in the first instance; openly and submissively in the second.

Relying on this pattern to predict how listeners will absorb aural material, Hamlet also uses it to “play upon” others himself. “Do you see yonder cloud that’s almost in shape of a camel?” he asks Polonius:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Polonius</th>
<th>By th’ mass and ’tis like a camel indeed.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>Methinks it is like a weasel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polonius</td>
<td>It is backed like a weasel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>Or like a whale?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polonius</td>
<td>Very like a whale.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3.2.369–73)

From camel to weasel to whale, Polonius dutifully sounds out the word Hamlet breathes into his ears. Later, the prince similarly sounds out the courtier Osric, perversely responding to his “it is very hot” with “No . . . ’tis very cold.” Osric

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44 Jonson, Every Man in His Humor, 2.3.175–77.
agrees ("It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed") only to be contradicted again ("it is very sultry and hot"). Once more, the courtier adjusts his weather report accordingly: "Exceedingly, my Lord, it is very sultry" (5.2.80–86). In their desire to please the prince, both Polonius and Osric seem to relinquish control of their sensory perception and their bodies more generally, allowing themselves to become Hamlet’s instruments. And yet, of course, it is not their sensory perception that has changed but rather their accounts of it. The exchanges display Hamlet’s power over these men and Guildenstern’s comparable powerlessness over the prince; though the King’s counselor, Polonius is nonetheless subservient to Hamlet and can therefore be forced, like Osric, to discourse according to his suggestions. Such pliant receptivity is at least in part an occupational hazard. Hamlet is aware of the conditions that have shaped Polonius and Osric’s deferential reception. Still, he mistakenly assumes that how people hear will always inevitably, consistently, and predictably be predetermined by rank or, occasionally, by other factors, such as guilt or innocence. His application of these assumptions to the reception of theatrical speeches, I will show, tests their validity while extending Hamlet’s interest in audition offstage.

III. Marking the Play

Given the prince’s fixation on the theater and his assumptions about reception, it is fitting that he chooses a play as both an investigative tool and a weapon to wield against the King. He assumes his stage-managed play will “prick,” “catch,” “tent,” and “touch” the listening Claudius, setting in motion a physiological process over which he will have no control and, ultimately, effecting a reformatory cure of the state. The guilty King will be played like a pipe through the players’ surgical application of certain sounds:

That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I’ll observe his looks,
I’ll tent him to the quick.

(2.2.523–32)

That a play could inspire the guilty in its audience to confess long-secret crimes was an early modern commonplace which Hamlet seems to have “heard” and
believed.\textsuperscript{45} It therefore shapes his assumptions about Claudius’s reception: like all guilty men or women, Claudius will be compelled to sound out the desired notes. Although the prince does not speak directly here of listening, his earlier insistence on the aurality of playing suggests that the play’s violent effects will be produced primarily through the ear. So, too, does Hamlet’s medical language. To “tent” Claudius is to perform a surgical procedure: a “tent” is defined by the\textit{Oxford English Dictionary} as a “roll or pledget” that is “often medicated,” and which is “used to search and cleanse a wound, or to keep open or distend a wound, sore, or natural orifice.”\textsuperscript{46} Hamlet imagines the play—something the court will “hear” the following day—invading Claudius’s body and propping open the very wound it inflicts. The “wound” in this case could be the ear itself, an open orifice Claudius wishes to keep closed. Hearing the players’ performance, Hamlet imagines, Claudius will be struck to the soul and tented to the quick: “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (ll. 539–40).

Yet there is something else at work here. Hamlet has chosen to have the players perform a revenge tragedy, \textit{The Murder of Gonzago}, an identification of genre that is crucial for two reasons: first, it suggests that Hamlet has harnessed for his own purposes the theatrical sound that Jonson’s comedies mock, one that is imagined as cleaving, pricking, tenting, and otherwise wounding its listeners; second, Hamlet’s weapon is a play very much like \textit{Hamlet} itself, a highly self-conscious remake of an earlier revenge tragedy (also called \textit{Hamlet}) that had already come to stand synecdochically for the genre.\textsuperscript{48} The play-within-the-play therefore tests both Jonson’s criticisms of this dramatic form and, at the same time, some of the genre’s implicit assumptions. Revenge tragedies depend in part upon an understanding of sound as materially dangerous, its reception dif-

\textsuperscript{45} In his 1612 \textit{Apology for Actors}, playwright Thomas Heywood writes of a Norfolk woman who attended “History of Fryer Francis” by “the then Earle of Sussex players”; according to Heywood, the play features an adulterous wife who murders her husband, only to be haunted by his ghost. During the Norfolk performance, a woman “till then of good estimation and report,” “finding her conscience (at this presentment) extremely troubled, suddenly skritch’d and cry’d out Oh my husband, my husband!” (sig. G1v). Hearing and seeing a ghost on stage compels a murderess to screech and cry out, confessing her own crime; she goes on to provide a detailed description of how and why she killed her spouse. This story presents a model of theatrical listening similar to that which Hamlet describes, and on which his plot depends.


\textsuperscript{47} That this pricking is accomplished through the ear is later suggested by Claudius himself; responding to an aphoristic speech of Polonius’s, the King murmurs in an aside, “How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!” (3.1.49).

\textsuperscript{48} Most likely written by Thomas Kyd, this earlier \textit{Hamlet}, or \textit{Ur-Hamlet}, was lampooned by Nashe in his 1589 preface to Greene’s \textit{Menaphon}; Thomas Lodge quoted it in his 1596 \textit{Wit’s Miser}. See Margreta de Grazia, “Hamlet” without Hamlet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 7–9, 173.
ficult to control. These plays’ final scenes tend to be spectacularly metatheatrical, featuring inset dramatic productions, masques, or performances of implicitly theatrical courtly pomp, such as the cannibalistic banquet Titus hosts costumed “like a cook” in *Titus Andronicus*.\(^49\) Here, the revenger’s long-concealed hatred is finally released in vehement confessions that his enemies are compelled to hear. Paired with other forms of violence, these wounding words produce catastrophic, near-apocalyptic destruction; the metatheatricality of these moments invites theatergoers to consider the risks of their own audition. *Hamlet* showcases this trope while departing from it in significant ways. Audiences familiar with *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* likely would have expected *Hamlet*’s inset play to work quite differently. Instead of dramatizing Denmark’s recent past, it should instantaneously transform Denmark’s future by ending, as these plays’ metatheatrical moments do, in tyrannicide. Rather than sitting in the audience, Hamlet the revenger should be performing; the play-within-the-play typically serves as a screen for violence, as the revenger bursts out of character to stab his listening enemies with accusations of guilt and thrusts of his sword. Even structurally, *Hamlet*’s inset play is not where it is supposed to be: *The Murder of Gonzago* is staged not in *Hamlet*’s final scenes, as such metatheatrical moments are in other revenge tragedies, but in *Hamlet*’s structural center—what modern editions label Act 3, scene 2.\(^50\)

Hamlet assumes his production will work as revenge tragedies are supposed to. It does not. Although Hamlet and his fellow audience members listen to *The Murder of Gonzago* in a variety of ways, no listener screams out a confession or doubles over in agony. Both Hamlet and Claudius are “touched” by what they hear, but neither is seriously wounded; and it is Hamlet, not the King, who appears less in control of his response. In fact, Claudius proves a resiliently defensive listener, first seeing and then both seeing and hearing the players enact his crime. Performed first as a dumb show and then restaged with a script, it is only the actors’ second spoken performance that stirs the King.\(^51\) Claudius calls for light (“Give me some light, away” [3.2.260]), stops the show, rises, and departs abruptly, demonstrating that he is far from insensible to the script’s

\(^{49}\) Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, in Greenblatt, gen. ed., 5.3.25sd. The stage direction appears in both the First Folio and the 1594 quarto.

\(^{50}\) This might be yet another way in which John Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge*, performed contemporaneously or shortly after *Hamlet*, echoes Shakespeare’s play. For a discussion of *Antonio’s Revenge* and what he reads as its derivative, less effective use of *Hamlet*’s more spectacular moments, see Jenkins, ed., 7–13.

\(^{51}\) This has become one of *Hamlet*’s most famous cruxes: why doesn’t Claudius’s conscience catch at the dumb show, or why must the play’s action be performed twice? The question has been answered, at least partly, by critics attentive to the play’s interest in theater’s aurality; see Pollard, esp. 136–43.
effects; yet he is nonetheless able to control his body’s response, keeping his confession closely kneneled until he is alone.

It is Hamlet, ironically, who seems most “touched” by what he hears during the performance. This, too, runs counter to plan. Although Hamlet assumes the King, if guilty, will be compelled to confess, he imagines performing together with Horatio an entirely different auditory practice, one in keeping with the tasteful listening discussed above: “And after [the play] we will both our judgements join / In censure of his seeming” (ll. 82–83). The two elite Wittenberg scholars will taste Claudius’s outburst, consider it, and judge it. Instead of coolly analyzing Claudius’s cry, however, Hamlet exalts at the confession his own imaginative hearing has partly produced. The Folio and First Quarto include an immediate, exuberant rejoinder to the King’s outburst: “What, frightened with false fire?” While Q2 lacks this rejoinder, all three texts feature Hamlet reciting, or perhaps even singing, a jubilant sing-song stanza in triumph to Horatio:

Why let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play,
For some must watch while some must sleep.
Thus runs the world away.

(ll. 263–66)

Rather than asking Horatio for his interpretation of the King’s response, Hamlet tells him what it should be: “Didst perceive? . . . Upon the talk of the poisoning” (ll. 279, 281). The prince excitedly hears in Claudius’s outburst incontrovertible proof of the Ghost’s claims (“O good Horatio, I’ll take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound” [ll. 278–79]). He is also tented to the quick—compelled to produce antic, even musical, speech in response.

Horatio, on the other hand, continues to hear cautiously. He tempers Hamlet’s boast, that the prince is qualified for “a fellowship in a cry of players,” to a mere “Half a share” (ll. 269–71). This typically Horatian response—that Hamlet deserves a share only in part—is not wholly critical, but careful. As with Fortinbras’s rumored attack, superstitions about cocks crowing on Christmas, and other speeches, Horatio considers both Claudius’s outburst and Hamlet’s antic answer to it. His judgment may be further complicated by his having heard other sounds in the hall. Glossing the play’s action, Hamlet famously misidentifies the poisoner as “one Lucianus, nephew to the king”—a slip that identifies Hamlet, Claudius’s nephew, as a potential regicide (l. 237). It is therefore unclear whether Hamlet’s remark or the “talk of the poisoning” has motivated the King’s strained response.52 Horatio, who could very well have heard this misidentifica-

52 Scholars have explained the misidentification of Lucianus as a dramatic trick by Shakespeare or a subconscious slip by Hamlet; either way, it conflates the original crime with
tion, wisely awaits further “probation” of Claudius’s guilt: to Hamlet’s “Didst perceive?” he opaquely responds, “Very well, my lord”; and to the prince’s further prompting, “Upon the talk of the poisoning,” he says, “I did very well note him” (l. 282). Having attended to the play, the King, and Hamlet’s commentary, Horatio remains skeptical, and he is cautious in what he unkennels.

In this way, The Murder of Gonzago represents a kind of experiment through which the theater’s aural impact can be evaluated. If Hamlet’s misidentification of Lucianus declares, intentionally or otherwise, his plan to kill the King, it also serves a different and equally important function. Collapsing the murder and its revenge into a single act, the word “nephew” reminds Hamlet’s audience that the Danish court is being treated to a revenge tragedy performed by a commercial acting troupe. In other words, they are hearing and seeing a play uncannily similar to Hamlet. That Gonzago is not received as expected questions not only the prince’s ability to listen well and to understand how theatrical audition works, but also the premises that undergird his thinking about sound and its reception. Instead of being predetermined by gender, social status, or other factors, including the sound of the actors themselves, theatrical audition is revealed in this scene to be a much more complicated, conscious process. Attentive to both the play and one another’s reactions to it, Gertrude, Claudius, Hamlet, and Ophelia in particular are able to focus their attention on certain sounds and to ignore others, thinking critically about the production’s aesthetic and its more substantive qualities. Ophelia begins, for example, by asking Hamlet to interpret both the dumb show and prologue and seems at first to mark his commentary more than the play itself:

**Ophelia**

What means this, my lord?

**Hamlet**

Marry, this munching mallico! It means mischief.

**Ophelia**

Belike this show imports the argument of the play . . . Will [the player-as-prologue] tell us what this show meant?

**Hamlet**

Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you ashamed to show, he’ll not shame to tell you what it means.

**Ophelia**

You are naught, you are naught. I’ll mark the play.

(ll. 129–133, 136–41)

Willing initially to relinquish her interpretive faculty to Hamlet, Ophelia does not sacrifice it altogether. Instead, she attends to Hamlet’s interpretations critically, eventually dismissing them as ridiculous, unhelpful, and bawdy. She then

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returns to “mark[ing]” the play for herself. Far from displaying the “too credent ear” that both her brother and father assume she, like all women, must possess, Ophelia proves a skillful theatrical listener: she tunes her ear to the prince, then to the players, then back again, offering judgments of her fellow auditors’ criticism and conversation as well as of the actors’ lines. Ophelia and Hamlet seem equally capable of sampling the sounds of the stage, criticizing the prologue’s brevity and its sing-song sound: “Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?” “‘Tis brief, my lord” (ll. 145–46). The play then becomes fodder for other conversations, including Ophelia and Hamlet’s flirtatious banter. Situated within this complicated soundscape, playgoers like Hamlet, Gertrude, and Ophelia are faced with the challenge of deciding which piece of dialogue—on or offstage—to “mark,” when to mark it, and how to do so.

Used in this passage, the verb “mark” recalls Hamlet’s opening scenes, in which the prince must decide whether to attend to, or “mark,” the Ghost’s story. In a play so attentive to sound, this echo cannot be incidental. It signals the shared seriousness of both scenes of audition, and the spiritual and physical risks of listening poorly in the playhouse. Hearing the wrong piece of a play, or only a piece, can skew interpretation and mark listeners in potentially dangerous ways, as Hamlet’s listening here attests. “In second husband let me be accurst,” the Player Queen declares, “None wed the second but who killed the first” (ll. 173–74). Hamlet’s interjection, “That’s wormwood,” has several meanings for the play’s on- and offstage audiences (l. 175). Used medicinally, wormwood was known to have a bitter taste; a medicine that fills up ears to unstop them, Gonzago’s “wormwood” is designed to disabuse the country’s “whole ear” of rumor by first tenting the King’s and Queen’s.53 Hamlet’s comment reveals how attentive he is to the speech’s effects on Gertrude and Claudius. He proves much less attentive, though, to the play itself. He does not “mark” the speech that follows this one, and cannot therefore be marked by it. Were he to be so, the play could perhaps end quite differently: “I do believe you think what now you speak,” the Player King responds, “But what we do determine oft we break. / Purpose is but the slave to memory” (ll. 180–82). Referring to the Player Queen’s promise not to remarry after her husband’s death, these lines’ emphasis on broken vows, and on purpose blunted by time, should pierce Hamlet more personally: first, he too has delayed; second, and more importantly, these lines offer a crucial reminder

to the prince and to Hamlet’s audience that remarriage is not necessarily monstrous, but natural. Neither meaning penetrates. Hamlet’s next interjection (“If she should break it now!” [l. 218]) proves he has continued to concentrate either on the Player Queen’s inconstancy or on Gertrude’s reaction. He has therefore missed the meaning of the Player King’s speech. Wormwood—poisonous or medicinal, destructive or restorative—only works if the ears into which it is poured are attentive to its sense. Otherwise it remains simply “Poison in jest,” carrying “No offense i’th’world” offstage (ll. 228–29). A play’s power to edify, then, is not inevitable, no matter how rumbling it sounds or how trippingly it is pronounced; but this does not render its power insignificant. What theatergoers hear in Hamlet, and how they hear it, are questions every bit as serious as what and how churchgoers hear, or heads of state. The play enacts on an individual, personal scale the institutional instability presaged by the violence of sound in early modern tragedies of revenge.

IV. Audiences to This Act

“Shakespeare’s Hamlet,” Margreta de Grazia points out, “was old on arrival.”\textsuperscript{54} Deliberately old fashioned, Hamlet is nevertheless neither outdated nor unoriginal. I have argued that Shakespeare’s cutting-edge play in deliberately old-fashioned dress ventriloquizes the attacks on revenge tragedy made by Ben Jonson and other playwrights, yet questions their validity. Hamlet is not only about these metatheatrical debates but deeply affected by them. They shape the tragic outcome of Hamlet as a character; the dramatic structure of the play; and, through Hamlet, the very form of revenge tragedy itself. By experimenting with formal conventions, Hamlet updates revenge for a changing theatrical marketplace, one which was being reshaped by the interests and expectations of its turn-of-the-century audiences. These interests included an ability to police the body’s boundaries, a struggle foregrounded in Jonson’s humoral comedies, and one which Hamlet ultimately identifies as futile. Hamlet therefore demonstrates revenge tragedy’s continued adaptability to the preoccupations of the moment while challenging some of the cultural ideals other plays were helping to produce.

In Hamlet’s final scenes, the prince’s effort to control his own hearing becomes tantamount to the struggle against mortality, a way of resisting the dissolution of the body into an unending cycle of destruction and decay. Having fought to manage his reception of sounds, sometimes successfully and at other times not, Hamlet seems at last to have accepted that absolute control of this process is

\textsuperscript{54} De Grazia, 8.
impossible—with regard not only to sounds, but also to the other material elements that sound suggests. No longer boasting, in the end, of his ability to resist being sounded out by others, Hamlet instead becomes willing to relinquish control of his body to the King's command, or perhaps to fate: “I am constant to my purposes. They follow the King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready. Now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now” (5.2.179–81). This transformation has its genesis, appropriately, in the graveyard scene, as Hamlet moves through the dust of the dead, musing at length over the theme that has disgusted him throughout the play: “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?” (5.1.193–94). Horatio warns, “Twere to consider too curiously to consider so,” yet for Hamlet, this has long been the only question worth considering (l. 195). It is the twin preoccupation to tasteful audition’s social significance, since by protecting the body from sound’s penetration, or by successfully managing its impact, individuals can seem to demarcate boundaries between themselves and their surroundings. To control what and how one hears is to display the possession of a particular palate, but it is also to display self-mastery, distinguishing oneself from a pipe, a barber’s virginals, or any of the other “instruments” that can be played and hence controlled by other men. Doing so implies inviolability against even death itself—the possibility, however unrealistic, of resisting the body’s eventual, inevitable diffusion into dust and clay.

Hamlet’s struggle against dissolution revises a familiar revenge tragedy conceit. The destruction of the body is one of the form’s central features, as is the sense that sound is a weapon that rips into the self. Hieronimo concludes his “play in sundry languages”—the climactic bloodbath of *The Spanish Tragedy*—with a lengthy confession that stuns his audience into silence and, oddly, forgetfulness; his listeners immediately ask to hear the same confession again, as though they have not just heard it spoken (“Why has thou done this undeserving deed?”). Rather than repeat his rant, Hieronimo bites out his own tongue, reserving for himself the power to both sound out his confession and disarticulate his own body. In Kyd’s play, the manipulation of sound’s flow is a political act performed through and on the body; Hieronimo’s refusal to be made to

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55 This is not to say that dismemberment features only in revenge tragedy, but that it appears consistently as a trope within these plays; see Margaret E. Owens, *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2005).

speak constitutes a rebellion against the state, and, more specifically, against the systems of power that have denied him justice for his murdered son. Predicated on a king's murder and the subsequent disinheritance of his only child, *Hamlet* is every bit as invested in the authentication and transmission of political power as is *The Spanish Tragedy*. But the struggle to control the body's intake and release of sounds becomes in *Hamlet* a personal one as well. It is not only a matter of disciplining the body for a political act—taking arms against a usurper—but also of attaining corporeal self-control.

This thematic difference may account for the best-known formal innovation of Shakespeare's play, its profusion of soliloquies—or, more accurately, its assignment of nearly all its soliloquies to only one character, Hamlet himself. In *Hamlet*, these speeches provide a glimpse inside the solipsistic echo chamber of the tasteful listener, whose ears absorb his own witty speeches more eagerly, and more deeply, than those he selectively samples from others. Rather than understanding Hamlet's soliloquies as thoughts overheard, we might consider them as speeches spoken to an onstage audience of one delighting in his own discourse. Such persistently self-centered audition could seem the safest alternative in a revenge tragedy like *Hamlet*, with its spoken daggers and poisoned ears, but the prince's recycling of sounds carries its own risks. According to early modern anatomists, the auditory canal is a two-way street that allows sounds to enter and, at the same time, enables the "expurgation" of "the superfluities that fall from the heade, by the eare into the mouth, as also to purge and depurate that aire which is implanted in the instrument of hearing." Excrement secreted from the brain collects in pools about the ears and must from time to time be expelled; so, too, must the inward air (that which is "implanted in the instrument of hearing") itself. This expurgation occurs through the ears and the mouth, which are connected through a system of canals and other passages. In

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57 In terms of the number of lines spoken in soliloquy, *The Spanish Tragedy* far outranks *Hamlet*. By my count, there are 354 lines spoken out of the earshot of others in *The Spanish Tragedy*; Q2 *Hamlet* features 216 lines, not including the 30 of the "To be or not to be" speech, which is delivered before Ophelia and the eavesdropping Claudius and Polonius. (By comparison, *Titus Andronicus* contains only 70 lines of soliloquized speech.) *The Spanish Tragedy*’s soliloquies are distributed among Hieronimo, Isabella, Lorenzo, and Pedringano; all but two of *Hamlet*’s soliloquies (not including the First Player’s speech, delivered to a listening onstage audience, and Ophelia’s, spoken before the eavesdropping Claudius and Polonius) are by Hamlet himself. The two not by Hamlet belong to Claudius (3.3.36–72, 97–98; 4.3.56–66).

58 See Harold Bloom’s claim that Shakespeare “represent[s] . . . inner change by showing characters pondering their own utterances” “and being altered through that consideration,” in *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991), 111, 54.

59 Helkiah Crooke, sig. Ddd6r.
this way the listener “is purged and receiueth new Ayre for his perpetuall nourishment.”60 Like the Galenic humoral economy whose regulation, as Gail Kern Paster and Michael Schoenfeldt have shown, is instrumental to the formation of early modern subjects, the flow of air into, through, and out of the body must be kept in balance to ensure good health.61 Venting passionate, potentially wounding words into only his own ears, Hamlet recycles and reabsorbs his own waste. On a poetic level, then, the soliloquy enacts the same closed economy glimpsed in Hamlet’s musings on mortality: that “A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm” (4.3.26–27). Like the cycles of corporeal decay with which he is preoccupied throughout the play, this verbal system admits of no release, no exit. In the context of the metatheatrical debates discussed above, Hamlet’s soliloquies serve two important functions. First, they demonstrate revenge tragedy’s suitability to the investigation of a subject increasingly central to early modern comedy, that of the individual’s struggle for corporeal self-control and, ultimately, inviolability. Second, they question the wisdom of the ideal these comedies helped to introduce. The only ears in this play that do prove impervious to unwanted sounds are those made fatally “senseless” to them (5.2.353). All other listeners will continue to be charged with the task of filtering and judging stories—separating rumor from matter “truly deliver[ed]”—and of fending off the violent physical and political effects of “warlike noise” (ll. 369, 333). It is only for the dead, for whom the rest is indeed silence, that this process ever becomes complete.

If, then, Hamlet incorporates and responds to attacks lobbed against the revenge tragedy genre by Ben Jonson and other playwrights, it also engages in some genre-based criticism of its own. By suggesting that the struggle for corporeal inviolability that their comedies helped to introduce is in fact futile, Hamlet refocuses attention on the ongoing process through which the self is produced. Sampling and judging sounds is a key part of this process, as the listener is charged with winnowing out potential pollutants without sacrificing the benefits of restorative speech. This requires hearing less like the Hamlet of the first two acts of Shakespeare’s play and more like the Hamlet encountered in its final scenes—or, finally, like Horatio, whose open yet still cautious ears absorb a range of theatrical sounds, and who judges all noises, theatrical and otherwise, with a discriminating faculty attuned to their potential power.

60 Helkiah Crooke, sig. Fff1v.