

Chapter 5

Mimetic Hearing and Meta-Hearing in *Hamlet*

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To ask “Who hears in *Hamlet*?” raises a host of related questions and sheds light on an important facet of the play’s metatheatricality. In his book *Shakespeare’s Imitations*, Mark Taylor discusses the ways in which the playwright collaborated with his own characters and inventions to imitate himself.¹ I would like to take Taylor’s concept of Shakespeare’s self-imitation in the direction of what I will call “mimetic hearing” created by onstage speakers and audiences in *Hamlet*. Plays’ audiences listen not only to characters’ speech but to the reactions of their onstage interlocutors, a listening which can be active or passive, acute or inattentive, successful or unsuccessful from the point of view of garnering information or understanding.

The multifariousness of hearing and listening on stage creates various models for playgoing audiences as well. For example, in 1.3 Ophelia and Laertes are often played as condescendingly bemused by their father’s long-winded “advice to his son.” We soon find out that condescension generally characterizes Polonius’s way of listening to others (with the exception of the royal pair). His children’s responses to hearing their father’s speech also affect our responses to it, as well as our responses to their speech in his presence. Similarly, Hamlet is very deliberate in his overly-literal hearing when he playacts madness with Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and replies to their queries much wide of the mark. Audiences listen appreciatively to these exchanges, savoring his clownish mishearing, whose witty subtext they derive from hearing his answers in the Q and A.

In *Hamlet*, hearing itself is a privileged theme which energizes audiences’ attention, but the phenomenon of hearing is scarcely a straightforward matter that works univocally toward advancing the action. The shifting dynamics of hearing constantly challenge audiences by raising issues about hearing and

presence, about eavesdropping, about overhearing, about ear-poisoning disinformation and about faulty or partial hearing or complete failure to hear. Dialogue creates a kind of meta-hearing that accompanies metatheatrical action, as in the player's speech or the play-within-the-play. Even apart from "who hears?" questions associated with conventions of the aside, onstage speech can create ambiguities as to who has heard or not.² Who hears Hamlet's remarks to Ophelia as the play-within-the-play is about to begin, for example? In addition, stage modes of attending to speech or sound may present audiences with conflicting modes of audition, as in 1.1., when Horatio listens skeptically in contrast to Bernardo's anxious listening. Onstage listening also creates many kinds of potential hearers, both on stage and off, by invoking audiences who hover—or might hover—just beyond the represented confines of the stage. For example, with the ghost's entry in 1.1., we infer that he has been near the platform on which the soldiers have been speaking of him, though it is not clear whether or not he has power to hear them from the place of "his confine" (TLN154)³ or has heard them at all before he enters. (He listens, it would seem, only to Hamlet.)⁴ Similarly, the prayer scene (4.1) attempts to invoke a listening deity who hears humans' thoughts, whether hidden or not—just as audiences of *Hamlet* are doing even as Claudius speaks his lines about Him. The ghost's entry later in the scene confirms that there are indeed supernatural listeners hovering.

Along with Hamlet, we navigate characters' various modes of hearing and attending to others' onstage speech and (occasionally) to their self-hearing. In listening to the play's complete dialogue, we largely become confederates of the prince, whose speech so dominates the play.⁵ At times as Hamlet interrogates speech, thought, and action, we become his spies through our own listening to anticipate dangers that might befall him or that he has unwittingly unleashed. Our listening alerts us to Hamlet's prescience when we apprehend something important he will or has just apprehended, but his keen responses also prime us to listen analytically and critically, as he does with others and indeed to himself. (He inspects his own "rogue and peasant slave" speech—his reaction to hearing the players' performance—and dissects it, belittling his tendency to "fall accursing" in the same way that he dissects Gertrude's hearing in the closet scene.)

Despite the varied directions, indirections, and vagaries of hearing in the play, it is toward the play's metaphysical conceit of "perfected hearing" that the playgoing audience is subtly being directed as *Hamlet* nears its close and we finally are left to our own devices without his voice.⁶ As we part ways in hearing "the rest" of the play, our hearing of its denouement allows us a sense that we, as audiences, have become perfect in our hearing of "the occurments more and lesse"(TLN 3846).

My discussion pays close attention to the diverse modes of hearing and mimetic hearing in selected scenes that span the play: a kind of “establishing” mode, which I call “ontological mimetic hearing,” that characterizes the first scene and much of act one; a mode of “not hearing” Claudius uses in 1.2 and of conflicted audition in 1.3; Hamlet’s mimetic response to hearing the player’s recitation of a scene of murder (2.2); his defiant response at the end of the first scene of “eavesdropping” (on Hamlet and Ophelia) in 3.1; an “editorial” hearing in the play-within-the-play (3.2); analytic hearing in the prayer scene (3.3); and various modes of hearing in the closet scene (3.4), the graveyard scene (5.1), and the match between Hamlet and Laertes (5.2).

Shakespeare’s Act 1, scene 1 creates a mode of what above I have called “ontological mimetic hearing,” audience hearing—imitative of characters’ hearing—that conjures characters or otherworldly presences into being. From the play’s first words, audiences, like the shadowy characters on stage, are brought into its world in our capacity as auditors. “Who’s there?” (TLN 3–4) applies to audiences’ questions about who is and who has the right to be there upon the platform, beings whose nighttime presences are made known initially only by their sounds⁸—and revealed as characters whose mystery can be unfolded to us by what we hear them say as they “watch” the minutes of this represented night along with us.⁹ “Stand and unfold your selfe” (TLN 5–6) can be heard as a command that voices our own wish to know about what is happening and to whom, the play’s primary questions: the command is answered not by observable “standing” but by auditory means of declaration: “Long live the king!” (TLN 7). The oft-noted usurpation of function—that Bernardo, who is approaching, does the challenging rather than the watch-standing Francisco—likewise imitates audience’s reactions as to who ought to be asking this question about “Who’s there?”¹⁰ The actor’s opening words voice our mute questions as watchers and overhearers of their watch, keeping us alert for new sounds and information.

Act 1, scene 1’s initially defensive questions also create the sense of a metaphysical reality that surrounds the immediate action, and we become listeners sensitive to that reality as well. In fact, it is listening that creates such reality in the play. Unlike Bernardo, Francisco, Horatio, and Marcellus, who unfold themselves after momentary uncertainty by “answering to” their names, the ghost comes into being by half-understood hints that only gradually take on form as a creation of speech and rumor, “this thing” (TLN 30) a “nothing” (TLN 31); “our fantasie,” (TLN 32) a “dreaded sight twice seen” (TLN 34) and finally, an almost-full embodiment available to our listening apprehension in the word “apparition” (TLN 37). Like the title character, whom we hear about before seeing, the ghost materializes from shreds and patches of speech. The ghost enters as an actual character very suddenly¹¹ and only many lines after

the language invokes him, but he appears to guard his speech from mortal listeners like Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio. Nevertheless, it is likely he can hear all that they're saying, whether it is addressed to him in plain English by a soldier or, potentially, in the learned language of a scholar like Horatio (the implication of Marcellus's line 42). Later in Act 1, through our ghostly proxy, audiences also become supernatural hearers from a cellarage, travelers temporarily released from Purgatory back into the human world, and in Act 4, listeners from a heavenly realm who can pierce through the "shuffling" of guilty kings. As hearers with superior powers of having "heard the argument" from all sides, audience members are invoked by characters who are audiences for each other, characters who hear each other imperfectly and whose meanings and intentions are only partially unfolded in obscure, air-borne grappings, plots, and stratagems that carry forward the play's action. Though capable of speech, we remain the mute audiences, troubled in ear as well as "the mind's eye," who will gradually become privileged with the full potential to retell Hamlet's story.

At this point in the first scene, though, we are endowed only with very limited understanding. In 1.5, our ear, with Hamlet's, will verge on crossing over completely to hearing "from the other side" when the ghost mentions but declines to tell the story of his "prison house" to "ears of flesh and blood" but instead tells the as-yet-unheard story of his demise to Hamlet's mortal ear. His telling is prefaced by a treble injunction, which suggests a sacred intensity of "serious hearing": *list, list, o list* (TLN 707, 1.5. 22). Hamlet's listening retrieves an otherwise lost history of his father's demise: It is the soundscape that transforms the aural into the material. This primary, ontological mode of hearing strikes the tonic chord to which audiences are returned at the end of the play.

In 1.2 Claudius establishes what might be called a judicial/executive mode of hearing, which rapidly fills in audiences on stage and off with quick-fire exposition concerning the state of Denmark. Such pragmatic, courtly hearing is peremptory: it tries for an immediate disposal of what would seem to us simply like normal worldly international relations and courtly suits if we had not earlier heard Horatio's account of the "post hast and Romadge" (124) and associated these signs of Denmark's disarray with our equivocal über-listener and proxy, the ghost. The pragmatism of Claudius's court "hearing" elicits only the right answers and sifts through and disposes of potential problems. As if in dialectical response to Claudius's mode of hearing is the ruminative self-hearing of Hamlet's first soliloquy.¹² This gives audiences initially struggling to understand the title character some knowledge of what is troubling him, though he himself only partially understands it as the remarriage of his mother and has been unable to voice it directly in public.

Whether or not Claudius addresses his insults about Hamlet's "faults to heaven" and "nature," and about his "impious stubbornness" to the hearing of the court or as an aside to Hamlet that is also heard by the Queen (who responds), audiences are bound to Hamlet's presumably defensive hearing, for they have heard Claudius's generous "hearing" of Laertes's suit, and Claudius's besmirching of his step-son's character cannot be heard dispassionately. (Cinematic *Hamlets*—with the notable exception of Olivier's—tend to cut to medium shots of Hamlet and the king and queen, suggesting that the court does not hear Claudius's demeaning chastisement.) If we have been taken in by this king's initial rhetorical talents, his upbraiding of the eponymous hero clearly undermines his just-published image of himself as the generous regent.

After the court's exit, audiences listen to Hamlet's first soliloquy in what might be called an "anticipatory/intuitive" mode of imitative hearing. For us, as for Hamlet, the deeper mystery that at first is only vaguely troubling him anticipates, while falling short of specifics, what the ghost is about to impart: What he has heard of the new king and the state of Denmark and his consciousness of the speedy remarriage of his mother "is not, nor it cannot come to good," and as we have later confirmation, Hamlet's "prophetic soul" has rightly fixed upon his uncle as the root of the troubles. What is being unfolded in the two parts of 1.2 is the growing opposition between a mind/voice like Claudius's that fills in any gaps in speech with a pedestrian, self-serving logic and a mind/voice like that of Hamlet, whose capacious hearing finds even more gaps between world and ideal that become increasingly more difficult to fill, except with his own life. The form and pressure of various voices gradually work towards an oppositional world in which Hamlet's being is rendered tragic.

Just as in 1.1, *hearing about* precedes seeing: we know at the end of 1.1 that Horatio is going to carry the tale of the apparition to Hamlet, and all of 1.4 is devoted to hearing: Hamlet has been summoned to the platform for the very purpose of hearing the ghost, and as he, Horatio, and Marcellus await the ghost's speech, they hear instead the loud flourish of trumpets and brays of drums signaling the king's "rouse." After the ghost's noiseless entry and refusal to speak, Hamlet's friends spend the rest of the scene trying to dissuade the prince from following to more "removed ground" so that he can hear the ghost's tale.

Hamlet's private but grounded suspicion of his uncle, which the ghost fleshes out, is augmented when in 1.5 we hear Hamlet request that Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus maintain their silence about what they have seen ("Let it be tenable in your silence still" TLN 448). As listeners, our silence likewise becomes "tenable" of Hamlet's future secrets, and we become privileged listeners who hold knowledge in reserve. After Hamlet has heard

the Ghost's story and confirmed his misgivings about Claudius, his earlier request turns into a demand: he compels his friends to swear that they will never reveal what they have "seen"—both about the ghost and about his future behavior. Since only he has heard the ghost's story, the oath applies to their sightings of the ghost, but then the invisible ghost's command to "swear" them to silence now also extends to their limited hearing of this supernatural figure. Unlike Gertrude in 3.4, who can neither see nor hear the ghost, Hamlet's friends have seen the ghost and now hear its command.

Whereas in 1.2. we share in Hamlet's mode of self-listening and his anticipations of future events, in 1.3, as we hear from Laertes, Ophelia, and Polonius, audiences may feel reservations about characters' modes of listening at the same time that they become aligned with possibly antagonistic or meddlesome listeners treading on private domestic ground and eager for the juicy details of a developing love story; we become auditory voyeurs. The first lines of 1.2, Laertes's dismissive reference to the "trifling" of Hamlet's favor, makes us want to find out more about it. As we listen to him lecture to Ophelia, though, we also resist the tendentious speaker, an unlistening moralizer who leaps to conclusions without seeking out the other side of the story—very much, as we soon find out, his father's son. When Ophelia rebuffs Laertes' lectures with her own spirited reply—sign of her resistant hearing—audiences both want to hear more and to applaud Ophelia's reserve and forthright challenge of Laertes's assumptions.¹³ Polonius's inquisition, less subtle, more hypocritical, has the merit at least of asking for her side of the story. It thus gratifies our curiosity about Hamlet and Ophelia, but his listening to her answers is reductive, dirty-minded, and peremptory in the extreme.¹⁴ His characteristically dull-witted "witty" condescension stimulates a laughing condescension to a great deal of what Polonius has to say. We may listen to him not so much conscious of what he is saying as of his way of saying it, but we imitate his initial way of half-attending to Ophelia's answers, as we anticipate discrepancies between what he says and what he does. We hear his simultaneously ingenious, unscrupulous, and absentminded directions to Reynaldo to slander Laertes by using "windlasses and . . . assaies of bias" (TLN 957) to "fish out" his son's truth, as we do his misguided schemas for fishing out Hamlet's. Like Hamlet, we ultimately find such listening tedious (however comic in its tediousness) and dangerously self-serving, and are likely to applaud the poetic justice that Hamlet voices: Polonius has finally become a "most still, most secret and most graue" (TLN 2581) counselor—the logical outcome of his "prating" knavery. Meanwhile, we follow the path of his indirections, listening more to his interlocutors' responses and attending more to his baroque schemas of hearing than to what he says, which is generally mistaken.

Polonius's fishing results in two elaborate eavesdropping schemes to hear what is on Hamlet's mind, the first, 3.1, being his exchange with Ophelia. Eavesdropping scenes invoke a profoundly mimetic form of hearing in audiences, because they are listening not only to the object of the eavesdropping but to the eavesdroppers themselves.¹⁵ Inasmuch as they set up a plan for hearing, they always have the potential to backfire, too. In comic scenes like Mavolio's box tree scene or the love declarations of Beatrice and Benedick, eavesdroppers' speech is audible at the same time that their eavesdropping is going on. In tragic scenes, the dialogue of eavesdropping is more likely to be temporally displaced, occurring just before the scene or in a subsequent scene of debriefing, so that onstage the eavesdropping on the eavesdroppers is only implicit. But in 3.1, when Hamlet suddenly asks "Where's your father?" and Ophelia answers "at home my lord" (TLN 1784–86), we hear Ophelia both as a "normal" interlocutor and conspiring eavesdropper suddenly unmasked. Hearing Ophelia's "at home my lord" shifts our allegiance to Hamlet's dismissive hearing as an angry interlocutor waiting for new lies¹⁶ to come out of Ophelia's mouth, but we also want to know how she is going to get out of the trap she has been complicit in building and whether or not Hamlet will allow her to. Hamlet's response, "Let the doors be shut upon him/That he may play the fool nowhere but in's owne house" (TLN 1797–98) is, in most productions, furious, showing that Hamlet is aware that she is lying—and doing a bad job at it, though this inference is never explicitly verified. Similarly, most productions show Hamlet raising his voice at this point, turning the tables on the invisible eavesdroppers by giving them notice that he is aware of them and expects them now to hear his angry abuse and threats.¹⁷ This gives offstage eavesdropping audiences the satisfaction of hearing Hamlet's challenge to those who are heard but not seen.¹⁸ It is also gratifying to hear that the conspirators have not understood what they have heard, so that their eavesdropping scheme becomes one of the many instances of meddlesomeness defeating itself.¹⁹

Though the metatheatricality of the play-within-the-play scene is both auditory and visual, its climax seems to be primarily visual in nature, given both the dumb show and *The Murder of Gonzago's* reenactments of King Hamlet's murder. There are corollary auditory strains of imitation that leap from stage actors to audience, however, and the veracity both of hearing and seeing are put to the test. The scene itself consummates the building thematic of poisoned or corrosive forced penetration of the ear that begins in the ghost's speech and is augmented with Hamlet's and the player's recitations in 2.2. Here Hamlet asks to hear a speech from the actor and begins speaking of "Priams slaughter" (TLN 1490–91); the actor obliges by reciting lines that narrate two auditory responses: first, the "hideous crash" of burning

Ilium that “takes prisoner Phyrus’s eare,” temporarily paralyzing him for a moment (a precursor of Hamlet’s self-excoriation for paralysis in the next soliloquy) which then results in a second movement of hearing: Hecuba’s “burst of clamor” that must have “made milch the burning eyes of heaven” (TLN 1558). The burst of clamor, which prompts the actor’s tears in speaking of Hecuba, also prompts Hamlet’s theory of mimetic hearing in exposing a person’s guilt, which he promulgates as a series of vocal reactions that connect playing, speaking, and hearing:

I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play,
Hauē by the very cunning of the scene
Beene strooke so to the soule, that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.
For murther, though it haue no tongue will speake
With most miraculous organ.
(TLN 1628–34)

Hamlet cites hearing, rumor (“I have heard/That”), for shaping his plan; he seems to have no doubt that from the king’s listening to the dramatic speech, Claudius will vocalize a confession (though the king does so, unfortunately, only in the subsequent scene, from which Hamlet exits too hastily). He does not specify whether he expects audition or viewing to cause the shakedown of soul he expects—but “the cunning of the scene” suggests its conceit, a time-tied and probably auditory effect. A few lines after this passage, he seems to be looking for visual cues of Claudius’s being “struck so to the soul” by the *Mousetrap* play. He will look to read his uncle’s reaction: If {a doe} <he but> blench/I know my course.” Claudius has been so good thus far at hiding his own guilt. But at the beginning of 3.2, Hamlet has given his advice to the players about how to “speak the speech” so that their words will hit home without clownish distractions or suffering from tameness. This in turn leads to the play-within-the-play that is designed both in pantomime and in imitative dialogue to imitate the murder story told by the ghost. The dialogic second part of the play within, then, with its poisonous speech, instantiates, on the level of hearing, the visible action that the Player King never gets to finish in the spoken version of the play-within.

In following Hamlet’s preparations here, we see him place Horatio as well as himself as an audience proxy in hearing: Hamlet’s directive to Horatio to watch carefully for signs of Claudius’s guilt also enjoins him—and us—to listen with supreme attention for a public replay of the royal murder, harking back to the ghost’s story and enjoinder—“list, list, o list.” The play-going audience’s tacit, “serious hearing” is a natural response, for we too want

Hamlet to spring the trap and hear Claudius's "confession" as a guilty creature sitting at a play—as must any supernatural auditor who may be listening. Nevertheless, Hamlet himself cannot resist adding "Wormwood, Wormwood" (TLN 2049), his editorial commentary, both before the play begins and to the provocation of the players' actions and speech. As the scene opens, Hamlet "interprets" for Ophelia, thus establishing a metatheatrical level of hearing/viewing the performance that animates the theater audience to the same effect. Though we are not sure whether his speech to Ophelia reaches the ears of the king and queen, Hamlet's running commentary soon becomes part of the poison that he pours directly into Claudius's ear, doubling the dare for Claudius both to watch and listen in silence if he is able.

But the prince's editorial comments become overkill; they invoke stage responses from other hearers of the play-within-the-play that threaten to spring the mousetrap prematurely and elicit a kind of editorial hearing in the audiences: i.e., his intrusions into his own carefully wrought plan can elicit impatience with Hamlet in the way that he gets impatient with the actors: we want to edit his comments or just shut him up. In fact, because of his failure to heed his own advice to Horatio about paying close (silent) attention, no one on stage or off receives proof positive from the king's reaction. We cannot be sure whether the king rises because he sees the Player King being poisoned or because he hears Hamlet disclosing the coming action of the "the murderer" getting "the love of Gonzagoes wife" (TLN 2134–5)—or both, but Claudius's not having risen at the dumb show indicates that what he has heard is what gets him on his feet. Hearing, as teasing and torment, as poisoned provocation, seems to work its mischief, though it fails to deliver unambiguous truth to the court (or indeed to us).

Thus in a compensatory way, the prayer scene (3.3) invokes audience's supernaturally-aware hearing to pierce the king's bosom definitively: we listen like an unseen confessor to Claudius's attempt at prayer, even as listening creates judgmental distance from the inefficacies and self-delusions of human speech (Claudius's) and of human hearing (Hamlet's). Ironically, Claudius's probing of the theology behind his own attempt at prayer (i.e., that if he truly repents he will have to proclaim his guilt, and he actually vocalizes thoughts about doing so) makes audiences mindful of the irony that Hamlet's shake-up has helped his enemy—bringing the king at least to consider true repentance and to give voice to that idea. We cannot rule out that before his entry Hamlet has heard any part of Claudius's conflicted attempts to bring himself to pray, though the stage direction for Hamlet's entry (that is explicit only in the Q1 version) seems to indicate that he does not hear. *The Enfolded Hamlet* indicates the end of Claudius's initial speech and Hamlet's entry thus:

Bowe stubborn knees, and hart with strings of steale,
 Be soft as sinnewes of the new borne babe,
 All may be well.

Enter Hamlet.

Ham. Now might I doe it {, but} <pat,> now {a} <he> is {a} praying.
 (TLN 2346–49)

It is possible either that Hamlet might be leaping to conclusions merely from Claudius's kneeling posture or that he has overheard the imperatives of the lines quoted here. In either case, rather than listen to Claudius praying or attempting to pray, Hamlet interposes his own thoughts. This editorial hearing once again outsmarts itself. Hamlet leaps to the right conclusion about the king's guilt but fails to attend the king's speech act. Audiences who have heard Claudius express his tormenting doubts may be in suspense as to whether or not the king's attempts at prayer have successfully reached the divine ear, but Hamlet seems to have no doubt that Claudius is succeeding at prayer, and he thus moves on, conjuring another "fitter time" rather than staying and overhearing anything the king might say next. The irony of scene's closing couplet, "my words flye up/My thoughts remain below," hinges on Hamlet's failure, as in the prior scene, to quiet his own thinking aloud and listen to the king's words.

In the closet scene (3.4), several onstage modes of hearing are immediately in agitated conflict, audible from the opening lines' heated stichomythia. We eavesdrop along with Polonius on the confrontation between Hamlet and Gertrude. We respond to Gertrude's spirited responses to the brutal lash of Hamlet's interrogations, since they promise information about the queen's back story and about the extent of her guilt in her husband's death. And for once, rather than having to listen to Polonius's "prattling," we hear nothing from him except for the one cry that gives him away. As his is a pernicious eavesdropping, though, unlike ours, there is a poetic justice in his having become "all ear" and unable to utter any self-identifying syllable before being dispatched. As for Gertrude, her resistance to hearing and bearing with Hamlet's anger and contempt, like Ophelia's prior resistance to masculine interrogation, is a "not hearing" that gains our sympathy as well when the scene opens. Hamlet's angry interrogations suggest Polonius's mode of "inquisition with prejudice": limited, unreceptive listening. His rant about her "senselessness" in having married Claudius smacks of his own faulty listening. To his catalogue of her faulty senses he adds the peculiar phrase "ears without hands" (TLN 2456+2). The phrase is weirdly arresting in its apprehension of the basically tactile nature of all sense perception and its conception of the ear as prehensile agent. It also comments on Gertrude's failures as a listener who cannot "grasp" what she hears. Though Hamlet speaks with overwhelming anger and

his words penetrate Gertude's ears "like daggers," such speech, as she admits, is both destructive and reclaiming: it forces its way into her "very soul" (TLN 2465). Nevertheless, Hamlet again goes too far.

It is often remarked that the effectiveness of the dramatic irony at this juncture lies in the fact that Gertrude thinks Hamlet mad because she cannot see the ghost who steps in to protect her from Hamlet's verbal violence: the fact is, she cannot hear the ghost either. (In Ophelia's subsequent mad scenes, it is her inability to hear her interlocutors' speech and fixation on her own speech that conveys her loss of reason.) Since we can both see and hear the ghost, we soon learn from his speech that he wishes to convince Hamlet to "step between her and her fighting soul"; this entreaty modulates Hamlet's violent manner of persuasion to one more easily listened to, and he adopts a manner more like his father's manner in the rest of the scene. As Hamlet notes to Gertrude, his father's "forme and cause conjoined, preaching to stones/ Would make them capable" (TLN 2507-8). Hamlet's somewhat moderated speech now finally penetrates Gertrude's self-defensive listening and allows her to drop the pretense that what he utters is madness rather than her own "trespass." The sign that Gertrude has indeed listened, repented, and become Hamlet's ally is that, like Bernardo, Marcellus, and Horatio, she agrees to resist "ravel[ing] the matter out" to Claudius: she becomes, like us, a silent listener who has "no life to breathe" what Hamlet has told her. Instead, she tells the inquiring king that Hamlet's has killed Polonius because he is "mad as the sea and wind/When both contend which is the mightier" (TLN 2593).

Hamlet's removal to and return from England create a lapse in his onstage presence that is filled in only by aural "sightings," especially the letter Horatio reads aloud. In a sense, this creates a nice parallelism regarding Fortinbras, about whom Hamlet hears only by "report" from the sea captain as he prepares for his voyage to England. The graveyard scene, in which the prince rematerializes on Danish ground, begins with a series of overhearings and riddling questions and answers that Hamlet imitates in his own discourse and that take audiences in multiple directions. All this builds to the scene's stunning irony, Hamlet's sudden hearing and apprehension of "who is to be buried" in the grave. The contagiously punning dialogue of all the interlocutors on stage hovers around this mystery, the solution of which provokes an existential change in the prince.

First there is the normal dramatic situation of audiences listening to the gravedigger/clowns: Their equivocal punning exchange raises questions about the person whom they are digging the grave for. We are conscious of knowing the answers to their questions concerning Ophelia, her rank, and the manner of death that she suffered because we have just heard that she is "drowned" and has therefore crossed the "bourne from which no traveler

returns.” Meanwhile Hamlet, who has just made a parallel border crossing in returning from exile to Denmark, enters and hears the first gravedigger singing as he digs. Though disconcerted, Hamlet listens in amusement, and his exchanges with Horatio take on the coloration of philosophical quibbling which we have heard in the gravediggers’ riddling exchange. The suggestion that Hamlet has the common touch is created by the fact that he responds in kind to what he hears of the commoners’ speech.

Ironically, Hamlet’s whole catechism first to Horatio and then to the gravedigger is detached from any understanding that an actual body of a human being is what the grave is being dug for. The anonymity, the thingliness of the body—with even its sex obscured by death—is captured in Hamlet’s exasperated question: “Who’s to be buried in it?” and the gravedigger’s equivocating answer: “One that was a woman sir, but rest her soule/shee’s dead” (TLN 3325–27). Hamlet’s rhetorical questions to the skulls and bones of lawyers and “great buyer[s] of land” remain abstract, ungrounded in the reality that lies right before him, as are his syllogisms and their conclusions. This continues when he imitates the gravedigger’s inquisitional manner, asking him “How long hast thou been grave-maker?” In the rough and tumble of their discourse, the gravedigger challenges the prince with his own lack of grounding in Denmark. When Hamlet asks the gravedigger “How long is that since?” (i.e., how long since “the day that our last King Hamlet o’ercame Fortinbras”), the clown condescendingly responds, “Cannot you tell that? every foole can tell that. It was {that} <the> very day that young Hamlet was borne: hee | that {is} <was> mad and sent into England (TLN 3337–39). And when Hamlet further asks the gravedigger “Vpon what ground” Hamlet has lost his wits, the gravedigger replies, “Why, heere in Denmarke” (TLN 3350–51). The stichomythia underscores the stunning coincidence that Hamlet was born on that very day that old King Hamlet defeated old Fortinbras. As Spencer has recognized, “There seems to be a curious symbolism in the gravedigger’s having entered upon his occupation at the same time as Hamlet entered into being, as if preparation for death began from the day of birth.”²⁰ It is as though Hamlet’s clownishly disengaged interrogation has called forth the “grounding” he will need to take on the grief he is about to feel. His address to the unhearing skull of Yorick seems to take him a bit closer to personal feeling for the dead. Yet since Hamlet knew Yorick as a “whoreson fellow,” a clown, Hamlet’s punning exchanges with the jocular gravedigger, like the Gravedigger’s singing, remain intellectual, witty. Despite Hamlet’s elaborate rhetorical dissection of death, his detachment from what he is experiencing of it remains, like the gravedigger’s, largely without “feeling of [the] business,” “ears without hands.”

His sallies of black humor rises to a high irony as he looks at Yorick's grinning skull: Now get you to my Ladies {table} | <Chamber>, & tell her, let her paint an inch thicke, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that (TLN 3380–82). Audiences, however, hear this humor with another twist, for we realize that he is standing, unknown, in (or just adjacent to) his lady's chamber, and that she will indeed shortly come to this favor. The grinning joke is on the joker.

Hamlet's withdrawal with Horatio to find out whose corpse it is and who is following it seems to imply that he cannot see the corpse borne on the bier of the funeral cortege²¹ and relies on overhearing for gathering this intelligence. In a few brief lines, his world will be overturned. First Hamlet overhears Laertes's angry responses to the priest about the "maimed rites"; then Laertes refers to his "sister," giving a local habitation and a name to the unidentified corpse so wronged by the curtailed funeral. Rossi comments that with this overhearing, "Hamlet is no longer the son of a murdered man and an adulteress; no longer a philosopher and a brooding melancholic. He is a lover who has lost his love" [quoted in Rosenberg, 858].²² On top of this blow, Hamlet overhears his mother's lamentations, "I hop't thou should'st haue been my *Hamlets* wife" (TLN 3436), (a revelation of Gertrude's view that is new to audiences and perhaps to him), and still more, Laertes's curses, stemming from his convoluted conclusion that Hamlet himself (presumably in killing Polonius) has been the cause of Ophelia's madness and death. During all this, Hamlet remains rooted to his spot of observation and overhearing. It is not until he overhears Laertes's histrionic protestations of love for Ophelia that he springs forth with a challenge and a declaration:

Ham. What is he whose {griefe} <griefes>
 Beares such an emphesis, whose phrase of sorrow
 {Coniures} <Coniure> the wandring starres, and makes them stand
 Like wonder wounded hearers: this is I
Hamlet the Dane.
 (TLN 3449–53)

Hamlet's self-identification as "the Dane" is a performative assertion announcing himself as king of Denmark, recalling Claudius's self-appellation ("You cannot speak of reason to the Dane") in scene 1.2 (TLN 141). Hamlet's words further remind us that in the First Quarto, this assertion is followed by the stage direction: "Hamlet leapes in after Laertes." In absorbing all that he has overheard, the hidden anonymous, "groundless" figure now begins to build a new selfhood rooted in the very bunglehole, the "chamber" to which he has just physically traced the grinning humor of Yorick, the actions and ambitions of men such as Alexander and Fortinbras, and—now in the flesh as

well as in theory—the beauty of Ophelia. His love of her, suddenly aroused and suffused with the knowledge that he will never see her again, infuriates him when he is subjected to Laertes’s “rant” on the same subject, and he turns the language he has been forced to listen to into cruel parody of Laertes’s speech.

It is fitting that this new self-confident identity has become rooted in the very ground in which he grapples with Laertes. He warns Laertes (and the listening king) that he is not to be trifled with, speaking directly to them this time instead of throwing threats out to unseen eavesdroppers (as in 3.1): “Yet haue I {in me something} <something in me> dangerous/Which let thy {wisdom} <wisenesse> feare (TLN 3459–60) and, closing the scene, “Let *Hercules* himself doe what he may,/The Cat will mew, and Dogge will haue his day.” (TLN 3490–91).

The play’s final scene includes a chain of non-hearings that express a breakdown in hearing: When Hamlet tries to apologize to Laertes, Laertes cannot “hear” him without first consulting with masters of the protocol of honor. Further, when Gertrude tries for her own reasons to establish that Hamlet needs a break or at least a drink and a wiped forehead, Hamlet refuses to “hear” her and tries to resume the contest without delay. When Gertrude drinks the poison, she not only ignores Claudius’s urging not to do so, but (in many productions willfully) reinterprets the King’s purpose in setting out the cup for Hamlet into a general invitation for everyone to drink up. When, dying, she and Laertes reveal Claudius’s secret treachery, he continues to broadcast his own false narrative—“O yet defend me friends, I am but hurt” (TLN 3806). His power to control what is “heard” disappears onstage and with the audience. (This lends dimension to the earlier narrative of the substituted commission to the English king, when the returning ambassadors discover and the audience is reminded that Claudius has lost control of his voice long before this moment.) When Laertes tells the king he’ll strike Hamlet “now,” Claudius refuses to “hear” him: “I doe not think’t” (TLN 1968), he replies. No one onstage is listening to anyone else onstage. Along with the general slaughter, all communication breaks down, until Horatio obeys Hamlet’s command to stay alive to tell his story. It begins the inquiry that sets the record straight for the onstage audience and for Hamlet. Laertes’s confession reveals the double treachery of Claudius: “The point envenomed too . . .” (TLN 3802–3). It prepares us as well as those on stage for the poetic justice of final action: “I am iustly kild with mine own treachery” (TLN 3785) and “He is iustly serued, it is a pyson temperd by himselfe” (TLN 3811–12); “Then venome to thy worke” (TLN 3802–3). It does not reveal all the treachery at once, for the court still responds to what it hears and sees with cries of “treason.” But listening enables Hamlet to grant Laertes’s dying prayer of forgiveness (“Heauen make

thee free of it,” TLN 3816), atoning for the hidden falsities of their initial handshake at the duel’s opening. It allows Horatio to be persuaded to stay behind and tell Hamlet’s story. It allows the English ambassador to learn that it was not Claudius (those “senseless” ears) who “gave commandment” for the deaths of Rosencranz and Guildenstern (TLN 3864–65).

Responsive hearing in *Hamlet* also brings about in 5.2 a kind of performative speech of naming, commands, and promises. Such speech is instrumental in affirming the larger audience’s special hearing role in having been privy to all the play’s events that have lead up to the “dismal” and unintelligible sight of carnage. In conveying conjecture of Fortinbras’s approach through his “warlike volly” (TLN 3840), Hamlet’s responsive hearing enables him to name a successor, who “haste[s]” to hear” his story and to receive a promise of confirmation, through Horatio’s voice, of Hamlet’s own “dying voyce” (TLN 3845). For Hamlet, Osric, the dying queen and Laertes; for the court and the English ambassador; and for Horatio, if not for the full court of Denmark near the very end, such de-centered listening prepares the ground both for Hamlet’s death and his transcendence in story. As Fortinbras gives orders, we hear plans for carrying Hamlet’s voice over into the voice of others who will live on afterwards, particularly Horatio and, through him, Fortinbras, who can “truly deliver” that story both to Denmark and his own people. Fortinbras perfects his potential “rites of memory” by his own “haste to hear” Horatio’s tale of Hamlet’s story, implying a future restoration of hearing and (potentially) political order. To be sure, that story may not be all that we have heard of Hamlet, whose like we shall not look upon again. It is more likely to be a summary recounting of those “occurrants,” and the order that this hearing inaugurates will likely be a lesser order, just as Fortinbras has “proved most royally” only by what Hamlet has heard about him and in a much more constricted sense than Hamlet himself has proved. But as perfected audiences who have summed up the “occurrants” both “more and less,” we join these surviving characters in a final sympathetically enlightened act of hearing that prolongs his being beyond death. Fortinbras’s commanded “Peale of Ordinance” (TLN 3905–6) “speaks loudly” if not eloquently enough for the departed prince, and we pay our own proper homage by listening both to its thundering tribute and to the pregnant silence that follows.

NOTES

1. Mark Taylor, *Shakespeare’s Imitations* (Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2002). In its exploration of Shakespeare’s mimetic strategies, Shakespeare’s self-imitations comprise about half the book, the other half exploring his imitations of others, among other facets of Shakespeare’s mimetic strategies.

2. Though these ambiguities are necessarily clarified in a given performance.
3. All quotations of *Hamlet* are from “The Enfolded Hamlet” in *Hamletworks.org*. (<http://www.leoyan.com/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/>).
4. See Bernice W. Kliman’s essays, “The Sentinels” and “The Ghost” in “Essays on *Hamlet*” in *Hamletworks.org*. (<http://www.leoyan.com/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/>) for an informative discussion of these issues.
5. Even, or perhaps especially, when Hamlet is offstage for forty minutes of the action, we listen largely to know what is awaiting him.
6. Though it could be argued that the ideal of an audience of “perfect hearing” is implicit in the denouement of any play, the frequent allusions to a divine ear creates a specific model of such hearing in *Hamlet*.
7. I use the term “ontological” in the sense of “bringing characters or spirits into being,” and “mimetic” in the sense that the audience’s listening imitates the listening of those on stage which *brings* those characters into being.
8. The onomastic nature of character identification would have been stronger on original stages, where the actors would have had to mime their “not seeing” on evenly illuminated platforms. The bitter cold of the night also gets instantiated through the dialogue.
9. Shakespeare crafted another such opening involving mimetic hearing that teases audiences through *occupatio*: in *Measure for Measure*’s first lines, the Duke both *mentions* and in the same breath *declines* to “unfold” the properties of state governance, as discussed in Kliman and Magnus’s edition of *Measure for Measure*. The New Kittredge Shakespeare. Eds. Bernice W. Kliman and Laury Magnus. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2011.
10. *Hamletworks.org*’s commentary notes reveal that this interpretation is first fully articulated in George Henry Lewes’s notes of 1847.
11. As frequently noted, the ghost enters not when he is being speculated about but in the midst of Horatio’s long-winded exposition of what is happening in Denmark: i.e., when Horatio, Bernardo, and Marcellus are no longer looking out for the ghost but have seated themselves to listen to Horatio.
12. As James Hirsh discusses in chapter 6 above and has thoroughly demonstrated in *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), soliloquies are the self-addressed speech delivered when a character feels confident he is not being overheard by other characters.
13. Unfortunately, many promptbooks cut Ophelia’s responses and defenses of Hamlet, so that in production, we are often unaware of her strength.
14. Polonius is just one of many fathers of motherless daughters who have no clue how to listen to them or that they ought to.
15. As Nova Myhill discusses below, it has been argued that the eavesdropper[s] are automatically accorded the key representational position—becoming figures of the locus as opposed to the *platea* (see below, pp. 164–65, 168, 170, and 176). However, with a “hidden” set of eavesdroppers, this scene, with Shakespeare’s most famous soliloquy, still claims the eavesdropped upon as its key representational figure, the “observed of all observers.”

16. Two interesting exceptions might be noted: the production with Simon Russell Beale, in which Ophelia indicates the truth to him while at the same time not giving herself away to the over-hearers by exposing them. It doesn't help: Hamlet is angry anyway that she took part in the charade; in Peter Wirth's production of 1960 (with Maximilian Schell), Hamlet earnestly gives Ophelia the opportunity to tell the truth; she almost does, then lies.

17. Strictly speaking, the text does not indicate that he knows their conversation is being eavesdropped upon nor who specifically might be eavesdropping, but as audiences do know this, they make the easy connection to Polonius ("Where's your father?") and to Claudius ("Those that are married, all but one shall live."). It is common staging practice for Hamlet to raise his voice here to carry into hidden recesses.

18. Concerning this particular scene, James Hirsh infers that because the king has expressly summoned Hamlet, the prince must be aware from the beginning of the hidden presence of the king and is deliberately feeding him false information about his state of mind. Thus, it is a "false soliloquy." However, there is certainly textual evidence from which a contrary inference might be drawn. In 2.2, the conspirators have said he walks *regularly* where they are placing Ophelia. Because he has been summoned, it does not follow that he expects to be overheard in the place where he regularly walks. Additionally, there is a situational similarity in 5.2. in which Hamlet is also "summoned" to a treacherous duel but does not suspect is a trap.

19. Hamlet's voice here, suggesting his intuition or knowledge of spies, is a potential built into the text that directors and actors may take up. It does have the effect of giving us a superbly conscious and prescient Hamlet, who is able marshal his own "play" of subterfuge against Claudius and his minions. If the lines are not played with such telegraphic knowledge, we get a more muddled Hamlet—one who is just not as sensitive a hearer.

20. Christopher Spencer. Quoted in *Hamletworks.org*. Commentary Note TLN 3338.

21. Harold Jenkins, in his 1982 Arden edition (p. 390, n. 243), notes Dover Wilson's comment that "An open coffin was . . . 'the common if not the usual practice of the time.'"

22. Marvin Rosenberg cites Rossi here in discussing the many ways that Hamlets have reacted to this knowledge, most of them suggesting the heartbreaking pathos of this intelligence.

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