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Hamlet: voice, music, sound

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Abstract

The literary canonisation of Hamlet *means that it is now most frequently encountered as a printed text. This crucially reconfigures its character, since Shakespeare wrote for sound, not print, and for an audience habituated to finely nuanced auditory semiotics.* Hamlet *generates its own soundscape as the major bearer of meanings. Apart from dialogue, its complex repertoire of auditory effects includes instrumental music and song. If we examine the play as an acoustic experience, we can situate it more 'soundly' in its epoch, and perhaps also reinterpret its puzzles, most notably Hamlet's procrastination, an issue that only began to be raised by later critics working in a more print-oriented era. If we reclaim the sonic dimensions of the play, his inexplicable indecisiveness may be seen as the point, not the puzzle, of the play, and a metaphor of the liminal epistemology of Shakespeare's age.*

The Renaissance ear

This article is part of a work-in-progress on sound in cultural history, and specifically that section of the enquiry dealing with auditory modalities in Renaissance England. That the period from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century represents a major transition, is the truism underpinning the word 'Renaissance'. Emergent humanism and the growing secularisation of knowledge contested Christian cosmologies, in association with a materialism that set scientific knowledge against revelation by faith in The Word, empiricism against the wisdom of antiquity. The emergence of secular capitalist economies and increasing urbanisation bring sea-changes that are debated in university and pulpit, in print and in conversation, and seep into evolving secular art and leisure forms. The theatre explores the secular dilemmas through themes of loyalty and revenge, love and fidelity, individual ambition and public order. Few plays of the period are held to articulate these dilemmas as subtly as *Hamlet*, which has made it one of the most fruitful sites for the study of the ambiguities of its epoch. For Lucien Goldmann it is their resonance in drama that produces the 'tragic vision' itself, based on his thesis of *Le Dieu Caché* – a god that is neither fully present, nor yet dead, but simply hidden (Goldmann 1964, e.g. p. 35).

My interest is in the balance between sonic and visual regimes where, I argue, we find a key to a crisis that underpins the manifestations of these changes and ambiguities. It is an epistemological crisis, which may be expressed in the questions: how do we know what we know? What kinds of evidence can we trust?

> Nature had lost her rights, and the criterion which had enabled men to distinguish truth from error, fact from fiction, and the possible from the absurd, gradually became more difficult to discern. (*ibid*., p. 26)

The information economy of Elizabethan England is broadly marked by a transition from orality to print, with the balance between aural and visual epistemologies shifting from the former to the latter. Walter Ong's pioneering arguments (e.g. Ong

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1958, 1977, 1982) have been subsequently nuanced (e.g. Wheale 1999), but remain fundamentally robust: the Renaissance mind was suspended between two ways of knowing, what is read and what is heard. As a corollary, the Elizabethan ear was arguably characterised by an alertness that we have lost. The phenomenology of hearing makes for a different kind of understanding and knowledge, for which Steven Feld has coined the term 'acoustemology' (Feld 1994). Interest in the acoustic ecology of the Renaissance has been an offshoot of the burgeoning study of the history of soundscapes, an area of study, pioneered most notably by R. Murray Schafer (e.g. Schafer 1977). The detailed underpinnings of my argument here are developed in my own work, of which this is a section, but apart from fragments such as published conference papers (e.g. Johnson 2002, 2003), most of this is still forthcoming. For present purposes, however, there is now sufficient (and increasing) published work to refer to as a framework rather than repeat all the unpublished arguments I have made elsewhere.

Bruce Smith's (1999) study of the early modern soundscape and the Elizabethan theatre provides the main published platform on which I build the present argument. Smith's work is an instructive reminder that the dramatist is constantly balancing two expressive conduits, sight and sound. Far more than for us in the twenty-first century, the Elizabethan audience experienced drama as a live acoustic phenomenon, and with a much more sophisticated ear. Shakespeare wrote for sound rather than for print. This shifting and precarious balance between sound and sight affects our 'reading' of *Hamlet* in two ways. Technically, in terms of the resources that Shakespeare draws upon, sound is used in very complex ways to communicate his themes. The pre-electric visual technology of the unroofed Elizabethan theatre placed a considerable burden on dialogue and music for communicating such details as lighting, setting, place and occasion. But this has a thematic resonance also. Shakespeare is writing for a society that is experiencing a transition, and therefore a tension, between two modes of knowing: visual and aural. I will suggest that this tension is an important presence in Hamlet himself, as he ponders the dilemmas of his personal, political and cosmological situation.

Apart from Smith's work, there have been several book-length studies relating to aurality in Shakespearean England (see, for example, Crockett 1995, Folkerth 2002), though the quantity is such a minimal fraction of the body of Shakespeare criticism that it is fair to describe it as a neglected area. Among those sounds that I am interested in are music and song, and in this connection Sternfeld remains a major authority (Sternfeld 1963). He explores the role of music in articulating the idea of impropriety which pervades *Hamlet*. Through the persistent violation of the musical protocols of the period, the contemporary audience would understand all the more clearly just how deeply the times were 'out of joint'. A parallel approach is taken by Folkerth (2002), who makes the case that hearing was not so much a supplementary source of information to vision, but a different and in many ways a superior one. The ear provided access to the inner truth of things: psychological processes, motivations, the invisible realm of spirit. Vision, on the other hand, was the conduit to the material world (see, for example, Folkerth 2002, pp. 48–57). The approach I wish to take builds primarily on the work of Smith, draws on Sternfeld, and has parallels with Folkerth. Its emphasis, however, differs from all three. Smith's work is a remarkable account of the soundscape of the Elizabethan world and its theatre. But it is not his intention to apply his findings to a reinterpretation of any of the plays. Sternfeld's interest is in music rather than sound in general, and in particular its symbology rather than its

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phenomenology. Folkerth's approach to sound is based more upon soundscape studies than upon a grounding in music history.

The basis of the hypothesis which drives my larger project enveloping this essay is that an auditory rather than predominantly visual approach to the past produces a different cultural history. In the case of *Hamlet* I suggest that attending to the play as an acoustic phenomenon will provide answers to questions which a textual approach cannot resolve. This will also involve relocating music from the realm of the aesthetic to that of acoustic phenomenology, the arguments for which I have set out elsewhere. Sometimes musicology cannot tell us why a piece of music works:

> Perhaps it is a good idea to recontextualise the music within the larger soundscape, because the meaning of that 'music' is generated by the meanings (iconic, indexical, symbolic, connotative, whatever) of that context. Apart from meanings, the sensuous appeal of the music is also disclosed more fully within the larger sensuous context of the occasion. (Johnson 1994, p. 41)

I am talking about the affective and phenomenological meaningfulness of sounds over and above words.

The sounds of *Hamlet*

Let us turn to the play, remembering the transitions experienced and debated by Shakespeare's society. I argue that underlying all these is an epistemological question. For the Elizabethan audience the question of what we know, and how we know it, was a matter of urgency. The question is explored in terms of a shifting and unstable relationship between the evidence of the eye and the ear. One way of examining the play, then, is to think of it not only as residing at, but being very much about, the interface of sight and sound.

I will also refer to the perennial question: Why does Hamlet procrastinate in taking revenge? It is provocative that the question only emerged at a later stage in the ascendancy of visual models in the analysis of culture, coinciding also with a well-developed fixation on the individual ego, and the exploration of psychological states, with the expectation of the most complex reasons behind them (see Jenkins 1982, p. 124). I suggest that Hamlet's prevarication may not have seemed so inexplicable to a contemporary audience preoccupied with the socio-political questions deriving from epistemological liminality.

Hamlet is a noisy play. It begins with disembodied voices in the darkness. It ends with the noise of ordnance off-stage. Between these two sonic events, non-vocalised sound is pervasive. Cockcrow announces the morning and hautboys the dumbshow. There are around a dozen heraldic flourishes involving trumpets, drums and ordnance. The final scene is especially rowdy, with trumpets and drums announcing the king, trumpets signalling the beginning of the duel, flourishes and ordnance when Hamlet scores a hit, the sounds of shots and marching soldiers off-stage as Fortinbras approaches, drums to accompany his entrance, and the ordnance that closes the play.[1] An attentive study discloses such persistent references to the sonic realm that they can be regarded as thematic as well as theatrical devices. Apart from 'effects', instrumental and vocal music, this includes references to the voice and hearing, and vocalisation which is purely sonic rather than lexical, such as the sound 'O'. A striking number of these sounds are acousmatic, and the voices acousmêtric, that is, having no visible source. The disembodiedness of such sounds makes them deeply unsettling and disorienting (see, for example, Chion 1994, pp. 71–3, 129–31). The uncertainty that is

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thematically pivotal in *Hamlet* is intensified by these pervasive acousmatic sounds, prompting the question: What may be known of a thing that is heard but not seen, or seen but not heard?

There are three moments in the play at which aural intersection of stagecraft and epistemology converge with particular force: the voice of the ghost, the songs of the deranged Ophelia and the indecorous grave-diggers, and the final sounds emanating from Hamlet. Apart from being sonic devices, they share the fact that, although vocalisation, their expressive power exists beyond and apart from the usual characteristics of speech. And the phenomenology of hearing invests these sounds with that aura of liminality which, I suggest, is both the subject and central trope of the play and its epoch.

The voice under the stage

Given that this journal is devoted to popular music, I will centralise the songs, but it is necessary to at least summarise the relevance of the other two episodes in order to emphasise that it is a much broader conception of sonority, rather than just one form of it, music, which is at the heart of this argument. The nub of a detailed analysis of the scene in which the ghost apparently speaks to Hamlet (I.v) is that, on the basis of the various extant texts of the play and the conventions of Elizabethan stagecraft, I would argue that it is entirely plausible that the only person who actually hears the ghost when others are present as potential verifiers, is Hamlet himself.[2] In the absence, then, of independent diegetic verification of what the ghost says, or that it even speaks, Hamlet's state becomes profoundly ambiguous. We have every reason to believe that he may be delusional, oppressed with the kinds of 'voices' associated with what we now call schizophrenia. He speaks of feigning madness, but how 'feigning' is a man who later sees a ghost no-one else sees, or who actually murders an acquaintance, Polonius, implausibly claiming he thought it was a rat behind the arras?

The under-stage voice of the ghost reinforcing Hamlet's direction to his friends that they swear silence, but which I suggest may or may not be heard by them, is a sonic reminder of Hamlet's ambiguous position. He is liminal emotionally, discursively and epistemologically. He is not only troubled by what to believe, but what kind of evidence is credible. If Hamlet's prevarication has been so mysterious to later readers, perhaps it is because they are not exercised by the same kind of dilemma. They still have had to make evidentiary decisions, but in general, between data that occupy the same authoritative secular information economy. There are more or less agreed checks and measures. We have had established ways of deciding. Hamlet prevaricates, largely because he has not. He is the medium of an era balanced between not just conflicting information, but dissonant knowledge regimes.

The scene also incorporates music. As Marcellus and Horatio prepare the Prince for the expected apparition on the castle ramparts, a loud noise suddenly breaks the midnight silence and the tense anticipation is disclosed in Horatio's words:

> It then draws near the season
> Wherein the spirit held his wont to walk.
> *A flourish of trumpets, and two pieces [of ordnance] go off.*
> What does that mean, my lord?
> *Ham.* The King doth wake tonight and takes his rouse,
> Keeps wassail, and the swagg'ring upspring reels;
> And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down,

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> The kettle-drum and trumpet thus bray out
> The triumph of his pledge.
> I.iv.5–12

This is an intensely dramatic effect, an acoustic shock through which is proclaimed a stepfather's tasteless usurpation, a King's debauchery, and a state's decline – in Hamlet's words, a 'heavy-headed revel' which 'Makes us traduc'd of other nations' (I.iv.17–18). For the modern eye scanning the printed page, the stage direction is so innocuous as to be scarcely noted. Yet what we have here is the sound of trumpets and ordnance suddenly blasting the tense, midnight silence, as represented in the enclosed space of the Elizabethan theatre. The sound is a sudden, unexpected, and deafening collision between two orders of reality and perception. While their eyes scan the darkness for signals from the 'otherworld', the world of the Other, their ears are suddenly assaulted with the disordered raucousness of this one.

'Out of Joint': popular music in *Hamlet*

Acoustic shock is one of the play's most powerful tools, both theatrically and thematically. The shock of the fanfares and ordnance is primarily sensory. But popular song is used to generate moral and aesthetic shock, further reminders of just how far 'out of joint' this world is. Sternfeld's study is an essential reference point in this connection, particularly in his analysis of the social and moral protocols of Elizabethan music. Music presented with due respect for form and occasion signified civil and political order. In recognising this it is also helpful to remind ourselves of another way in which the Elizabethan ear was more sensitively attuned than ours. As Sternfeld points out, the experience of tuning was different for the Elizabethan, because equal temperament did not come into universal use until the nineteenth century. Equal temperament, meaning that each semitone is an equal interval, means that all fixed pitch instruments are marginally out of tune in all keys, the price that is paid for ease of modulation. 'Mean-tone temperament', using scales of 'just intonation', made some keys closer to perfect intonation, while some other keys were unusable. The Elizabethan ear thus had regular access to a degree of musical consonance, and also of dissonance, greater than the modern ear. Its sense of both was thus more highly developed, and the notion of a whole consort of strings (which are not fixed pitch instruments) was a 'striking restoration of law and order' (Sternfeld 1963, p. 241). The disorder in Hamlet is thus signalled musically, in improper, indecorous or cacophonous musical interpolations, and following Hamlet's death, with trumpets instead of dirges, drums instead of angels (*ibid*., pp. 210–12).

Over and above the specific character of the music presented, Sternfeld also makes the point that it has a traditional association with magical events (*ibid*., pp. 79–92). This suggestion of otherworldliness meant that the playwright could thus be confident that the use of song itself would connote a different order of being, as well as the fact that the manner of its deployment would send nuanced signals in an aural culture highly sensitive to its phenomenological and symbolic meaning. Ophelia is the most striking 'singer' in the play, and even before she appears as such, Horatio's report of her changed behaviour prepares us for someone who has passed into a disordered, liminal world of 'half sense' (IV.v.7). A moment later she enters, 'distracted' (and in the First Quarto version, playing a lute). During the remainder of the scene, her dialogue alternates erratically between speech and fragments

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of song. Sternfeld has sourced and identified all seven of these songs. I wish now to incorporate his invaluable scholarship into the present argument.

It is significant that all the songs are pre-existing. One of the songs, for example, is 'Bonny Sweet Robin', the music for which was also used for other lyrics. The song was even more popular in Shakespeare's day than the now clichéd 'genre synecdoche' of the music of Merrie England, 'Greensleeves'.[3] Its popularity was probably based on the fact that it is an 'endearment' song, with possibilities for punning (another sonic effect) and *double entendre* (*ibid*., pp. 68–9). To retrieve some sense of the way these features would have both confirmed and exploited the shared culture of the audience as an interpretive community, think in terms of the wink-wink *double entendre* tradition in the twentieth-century popular music repertoire, in songs like 'A Porter's Love Song to a Chambermaid' or 'Kitchen Man'. Shakespeare is using popular music in ways that have become increasingly common in recent film: to evoke shared memories, but in ways that suggest the disruption of the order they represented. Like such late twentieth-century films as *The Big Chill*, they would thus carry associations for the audience that would be essential in their contribution to meaning and affect, including proclaiming the full extent of Ophelia's derangement. Indeed, the associations of these familiar popular songs would be of primary rather than secondary importance. Had Shakespeare written or commissioned new songs which made no reference to pre-existing materials, it would have been necessary to compose lyrics which explicitly spoke of derangement.

Apart from proclaiming a mind unable to maintain a coherent narrative, the complex impact of this technique can perhaps be better appreciated if we make passing analogies with modern music. Ophelia's songs are evidence of derangement at a number of levels. One is in terms of social protocols. While musical skills were desirable, the unsolicited public singing of songs by the aristocracy was unbefitting persons of rank and likely to erode social distinctions. Sternfeld observes that other Elizabethan heroines 'would regard with the utmost disdain such uncontrolled behaviour'. They would not sing, but would 'command their servants to do so' (*ibid*., p. 64). Ophelia's surrender of all dignity and power is proclaimed in her reversion 'to the songs a nurse may have taught her; not the aristocratic ayre, but crude songs of the common folk' (*ibid*., p. 65). They are also aesthetically disordered, not simply in being fragmented, but in their generic heterogeneity. They are mixtures of disparate genres and non-song. Laments are mixed with nonsense lines usually associated with light-hearted 'may-time' popular songs. Finally, they are also morally indecorous, especially in the mouth of a young woman of Ophelia's rank, in that many of them deal with extramarital affairs (*ibid*., pp. 57–8).

These dissonances have been muted by the period flavour shared by all these lyrics. To today's non-specialist audience, the impression is likely to be all-of-a-piece Elizabethan hey-nonny-no balladry. To gain some sense of the disturbing social and moral incongruity of the collage, it might help to imagine something like the daughter of a prominent politician walking into a formal reception hosted by her father and bursting into gangsta rap or a version of 'Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?'. To sample the aesthetic dissonance, think of the words of, say, one of Mahler's 'Songs of the Earth' interpolated with Little Richard's 'Awopbopaloobop – Awopbamboom'. In all this, Shakespeare is exploiting the shared understanding of the protocols regarding the performance of popular songs, that certain subjects and genres are appropriate in some circumstances but not in others, that the observance of these protocols proclaims a stable order, while their violation is not just a style gaffe, but a

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collapse of the whole cosmic structure embodied in courtly order. Ophelia's disordered and rambling performance of popular song is itself evidence that something is rotten in the body politic. In every way, through her songs, Ophelia stands at the doorway to the parallel disordered universe opened up by Hamlet, somewhere between normal life of the court, and 'that other bourne' – death – which is the subject of her delirium, and its destination. By playing with an established popular repertoire, disordering and fragmenting it, presenting it in inappropriate settings and juxtapositions, the sense of a known world turned inside out, of poignant ironies, is far more disturbingly achieved than would overtly 'mad' music. It is the juxtapositioning of the normal with the disordered which is disturbing, because it emphasises the proximity of the two and therefore the fragility of the former. *Hamlet* is largely about the thinness of the membrane between two orders. Both he and Ophelia are on the edge. The fragmented collage of existing popular music repertoire emphasises this in the case of Ophelia.

Popular music functions in a similar way when put into the mouths of the clowns/gravediggers in V.i. Their roles, as attendants at death, mock equally all other realms of conduct. As one of the diggers riddles to the other: 'Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter? . . . a gravemaker: the houses that he makes, last till doomsday' (V.1.50–9). This funeral scene is the blacker for the apparent lack of fitness to the usual obsequies. Even Hamlet, himself drifting between perspectives, is offended: 'Has this fellow no feelings of his business, that he sings at grave-making? (V.i.65). In the shadow of the austere Senecan tradition of tragedy, Shakespeare's decision to put comic songs at the site of funerary solemnity would in itself have struck the audience as generically unsettling (*ibid*., p. 7), rather like the song 'Always Look on the Bright Side', in the concluding crucifixion scene of the film *The Life of Brian*.

Death and Sound: the rest is silence

Death and the acoustic realm are intimately connected in this play. In terms of the sensorium, the one thing that distinguishes the dead is that they cannot 'sound' and cannot be 'sounded': 'The ears are senseless' (V.ii.374). Shakespeare is so explicit on this distinction that it is hard to believe it was not part of his conscious motivic scheme. We are reminded on a number of occasions that the dead remain accessible through every other physical sense. Obviously, they may be seen; true to the genre of Elizabethan/Jacobean revenge tragedy, the play seems to revel in the spectacle of the dead. They can be touched, as when Hamlet 'lugs the guts' of Polonius' dead body into another room, or when he holds the skull of Yorick. They may be smelled: when the king asks the whereabouts of Polonius, Hamlet replies, '. . . if you find him not within this month, you shall nose him as you go up the stairs into the lobby' (IV.iii.35–6). Contemplating Yorick's skull, he wonders if the great Alexander looked thus in death, 'And smelt so? Pah!' (V.i.194). The dead may even be tasted. Polonius is now a meal for a 'convocation of politic worms'; both king and beggar become meat for maggots, and a man may eat the fish caught by the worm that ate the king (IV.iii.19–25).

But the dead may not be heard. The dead are silent. They cannot speak, they cannot sing. Watching the casual exhumations of the grave-digger, Hamlet observes, 'That skull had a tongue in it and could sing once' (V.i.74), and contemplating the skull of Yorick: 'Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? Your flashes of

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merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?' (V.i.183–5). All the songs, all the courtly words – 'Good morrow sweet Lord: how dost thou good Lord?' (V.i.81–2) – all the legal niceties that sustained Polonius and are mocked by the grave-diggers, all the quips and verbal punctilios: they are nothing. Silence.

And so to the third of the sonic events: Hamlet's death. It is a scene which takes the action beyond the processes of agonised reflection, and it takes Hamlet beyond epistemological puzzles, into something like the unequivocal consciousness of the beserker. Hamlet and Laertes have wounded each other. The Queen swoons, at the sight of their blood according to the King (V.ii.314). As she dies, however, she declares that she has been poisoned, at which Hamlet cries 'Treachery! Seek it out' (lV.ii.318). But he is still missing a crucial piece of information, which is supplied by Laertes:

In thee there is not half an hour's life.
The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
Unbated and envenom'd.
V.ii.319–23

All the foregoing traumas bring their weight to bear on this moment. But what cuts the Gordian knot is the revelation that he, Hamlet, is 'slain'. He is released into action, beyond the paralysing question of 'to be or not to be', and the parallel question of to act or not to act is no longer of any significance. He is a 'dead man walking'.

I want to use this key image to return to the role of sound and the idea of acoustic shock. I have suggested that the shifting and often dissonant relationship between sound and sight has been a correlative of the liminality of the world of Hamlet and of Shakespeare and his time. The liminal is a perennial site of disorientation ranging from fascination to horror. The order of things is threatened by the uncertain spaces between the categories on which we base social and personal conduct and belief. The androgynous, the idiot savant, the 'half-breed', the freak which appears half animal (the Elephant Man), are all exhibits in the chamber of mythic anxieties and horrors. Of all of these, perhaps the most horrific is the undead dead. They exist as various archetypes which haunt our musings on mortality: from the zombie created by voodoo to the monster created by science. In the twentieth century it also takes the form of the prosthetic human being (as in Pynchon's novel *V*) or the android which continues to function even when totally dismembered, as in Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

Above all it is the 'ordinary' human being who is somewhere between the living and the dead who fills us with horror, and of these, none more so than the one who continues to utter in death. Given the pallid inadequacy of the printed playtext, it is important to take a moment to try to capture the ghastly intensity, the embodied immediacy of this experience. It was because of such 'utterance' that the first casualty in the charge of the Light Brigade was also the one most vividly remembered. Within 200 metres of the beginning of the advance, Captain Louis Nolan broke ranks, and as he did so, had his chest torn open by a shell splinter. His horse turned back through the ranks, and from the mounted corpse with the exposed heart came a sustained scream. In the words of a survivor, 'The weird shriek and the awful face as the rider and horse disappeared haunt me now to this day, the first horror of that ride of horrors'.[4]

The sounding dead is a particularly disturbing embodiment of the liminal. It dismantles one of the most obdurate of all phenomenological certainties: the distinction between life and death, the literal vitality of vocalisation and the profound silence

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of the grave. The image haunts Shakespeare's 'rotten' Denmark, as the death of Hamlet's father awakens memories of the time 'ere the mightiest Julius fell', when

> The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
> Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.
> (I.i.118–9)

For Hamlet himself, the ghost becomes a prime force of disequilibrium when it is supposedly heard to speak as well as merely appear.

With an appreciation of the impact of the vocalising dead, let us turn to Hamlet's last utterance. The usual version of Hamlet's final words is as printed in the edition I am using:

> O, I die, Horatio.
> The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit.
> I cannot live to hear the news from England,
> But I do prophesy th'election lights
> On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.
> So tell him, with th'occurrents more or less
> Which have solicited – the rest is silence.
> V.ii.357–63

In the context of this argument about sound, there is particular resonance in these words, which are about hearing, speech and silence. Hamlet is now, indeed, dead. To be dead is to be silent. If all 'the rest' is silence, then the passage from life to death has been completed unequivocally.

But in some versions, as far as Hamlet is concerned, the rest is not yet silence. The First Folio gives the following lines:

> . . . He has my dying voice.
> So tell him, with th'occurrents more or less
> Which have solicited – the rest is silence. O,o,o,o *Dyes*[5]

This text has been the subject of little comment, with the most notable exception of Smith (1999). I repeat my acknowledgement of his study as the stimulus for what follows by way of conclusion, and I briefly recapitulate some of his points in order to build further on them. These four exclamations, 'O,o,o,o' appear on the printed page as dispensable embellishments, standard vocal gestures in the same supposedly trivial category as 'Aaargh' of comic strips.

In his Introduction to the Arden edition, Jenkins includes them in his listing of additions found in the First Folio which may well represent interpolations by actors (Jenkins 1982, p. 62). That is, they are generated out of performance rather than an earlier printed text, and Smith argues that, as the strongest of all phonemes, the physical intensity of the exclamation 'O' makes it an arresting marker in the Elizabethan playhouse (e.g. Smith 1999, pp. 8, 35, 225). I now want to develop this further, in relation to Hamlet, to give a final illustration of how sound (not just speech) underscores thematic issues.

We have noted the commonplace that in vocalisation, sound is often virtually all the meaning, as in a sigh or a scream. The meaning is in the sound itself, and thus all but disappears in print. What does 'O' *mean* in, for example, the sentence beginning, 'O that this too too sullied flesh would melt' (I.ii.129)? In the grammar of print, it adds nothing to the sentence. But it is a very powerful sound. It announces itself, it proclaims, 'I am a vocalising creature'. Because of the distinctiveness of each human voice, it can also proclaim, 'I am *this* human creature'. It signals something important

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about to be uttered, whether it is 'O what a feeling' to advertise a brand of car or 'O, I die'. It is the irreducible sonic assertion that I am, and am about to speak.

Where Hamlet's last words are given as 'The rest is silence', he passes from words to silence, as though there is no ambiguous space between the two. But the play is about the uncertainty of such propositions, about not knowing, and not knowing how we know. Hamlet the prince is situated ambiguously between a number of spaces. He is between two historical moments which may be simplistically articulated through such binaries as the medieval and the modern, the Christian and the secular. To recall Goldmann: God is neither present nor dead, just in hiding and indistinct: like Hamlet's father. Hamlet is between two epistemologies, the oral and the textual. He thinks of himself as suspended between two states of reality – to be or not to be – and two states of mind: sanity and insanity. Hamlet's world, as created by Shakespeare for his audience, is not neatly constructed of mutually exclusive categories, like speech and silence. In the First Folio version he passes not directly from one category to the other, but from speech, through which the mind projects itself acoustically, to pure sound, the projection of the body, and finally to silence.

'O' is a common exclamation on the Elizabethan stage. Most frequently it draws attention to some mental disturbance, and is therefore used most frequently by Ophelia and Laertes in their grief (about six times each), the Queen in her divided loyalty (about nine times), and the King in his moments of guilt (about eighteen times). But in Hamlet, the frequency (nearly fifty times) makes it something of an acoustic signature. It comes to seem more than a spontaneous exclamation, and something played with just out of a fascination with sound for its own sake:

> O heavens, die two months ago and not forgotten yet! Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year. But by'r lady a must build churches then, or else shall a suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is 'For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot'. (III.ii.128–33)

The association between this sound, popular song (the source of the last clause above), mental disorder and, here, death, is of interest, especially in relation to the First Folio's version of Hamlet's last sounds. If this discussion of a sound so apparently semiotically neutral seems some pointlessly fanciful piece of literary train spotting, perhaps it is no more or less so than the exploration of motifs based on imagery, which sustains so much 'literary' analysis of Shakespeare. Scepticism regarding attention to such a detail may well be a further sign of how deeply entrenched we have become in historically specific modes of analysis, and dismissive of other ways of knowing. I am trying to gain a clearer phenomenological appreciation of the fact that sound was a more primary medium than print. And if we try to 'audialise' that dialogue, we may begin to consider the cumulative impact of that motivic sound on alert ears. These last sounds Hamlet makes, as recorded in the First Folio, refer back to his vocalised life but lead us also to his death. Much of this play is about these two states overlapping in spite of our attempts to keep them separate. Hamlet moves in and out of both worlds, now mad, now sane, fighting in a grave, talking to a skull and to a ghost, suspended between two worlds, two historical epochs.

Let us imagine how his final sounds, 'O,o,o,o', might impact on the ear in the context of the play's fixation on liminality, ambiguity, transition. How trivial this looks on the page. But consider how that could have been played, how deeply disturbing would be the inarticulate despair and agony of a body from which 'life', in the form of the speaking mind, had departed – recall, this is the last utterance of a man

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who, it was widely believed, had in fact lost his reason. These final sounds he makes, apparently detachable 'afterthoughts' that some printers casually excised, could well have been one of the most horrifying moments in Hamlet's navigation of his liminal space. And it is irreducibly acoustic.

Endnotes

1. There are of course variant versions, so that sometimes different instruments are specified. Sternfeld (1963) provides an account of these.
2. Apart from other cited sources, I wish to thank my colleague, Associate Professor Richard Madelaine, for his advice on Elizabethan stage conventions. The argument I am summarising can be sustained through detailed analysis, but of a kind which would take us beyond the formal brief of this article.
3. The term 'genre syndoche' is derived from Philip Tagg's 'sign typology of music', and it broadly refers to a piece of music used to evoke an entire culture. See, for example, Tagg and Clarida (2003, Index).
4. Private Wightman, 17th Lancers, cited in Adkin (2000, p. 154).
5. See the facsimile edition, Hinman (1968, p. 789). The final sounds have been so little noted that, among the many later editions, few retain them, including even Harrison (1937), whose edition is primarily based on the First Folio.

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