

Abstract: This chapter addresses how the body's release of the breath troubles, in the context of theatrical representation, the boundaries between the internal and the external and between actors and audience. Drawing on Renaissance and modern theories of emotions to explore the affective resonance of sighing in *Hamlet*, the chapter examines what it means to waste one's self in breath, or how breath consumes the body as much as it invigorates it. Hypocritical, instrumental, communicative, self-consuming and self-revealing, breathing in *Hamlet* has no fixed referent but shifts as often as the characters shift their position and perspective, constantly pointing to the impossibility of ordering Hamlet's and the playgoers' experience.

Hamlet's "Spendthrift Sigh": Emotional Breathing On and Off the Stage

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This chapter is concerned with the air that circulates in and out of the emotional body in *Hamlet*. A play heavily invested in air, as Carla Mazzio and Carolyn Sale have argued, as well as in the materiality of life and death, in the permeability of physical boundaries, and in shaping and locating the self in relation to the outside world, *Hamlet* foregrounds the instability and artificiality of ascribing meaning to the air that escapes the human body.¹ Drawing on Mazzio and Sale, I focus specifically on sighing to argue that what characterizes sighing in the play is not only its ability to signify a range of emotional perturbations, such as love, longing, pain, sorrow, grief, but also its role in restoring the body to provisional order, mirroring thus the temporary reality of a theatrical performance that re-enacts and regulates emotions only for them to break lose again. *Hamlet* does not rest at a definition of sighing as a symptom that accompanies emotional or physical suffering, but offers us an example of sighs as 'emotional practice'. The anthropologist Monique Scheer, building on the work of William Reddy and Barbara Rosenwein, has historicized emotions by applying Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, a 'system of cognitive and motivating structures' on which she expands as follows: 'people move about in their social environments ... in most cases supremely practiced at the subtleties of movement, posture, gesture, and expression that connect them with others as well as communicate to themselves who they are'.² Sighs, which

¹ See Carla Mazzio, "The History of Air: *Hamlet* and the Trouble with Instruments," *South Central Review* 26 (2009): 153-196, and Carolyn Sale, "Eating Air, Feeling Smells: 'Hamlet's' Theory of Performance," *Renaissance Drama* 35 (2006): 145-168.

Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51 (2012): 193-220. See also

in affect theory would traditionally be classified as ‘automatic behaviours, reflexes, spontaneous responses’, can in this respect be ‘more fruitfully thought of as habits emerging where bodily capacities and cultural requirements meet’.³ What makes ‘emotional practice’ a pertinent designation for sighing is the underlining principle that ‘the physiological contains both the organic and the social, which cooperate in the production of emotion’, undermining purist clings to the body as well as social determinism.⁴ Approaching sighs as ‘emotional practice’ allows for a flexible model of materiality that affirms (while contradicting) Scheer’s point that ‘emotions cannot be conjured out of thin air’; in *Hamlet* they can.⁵

Translating emotional breathing from page to stage is often a seamless, inconspicuous process. Explicit stage directions, textual references to a character’s agonized or lovesick exhalations, and cues, such as the ‘cryptodirections’ E.A.J. Honigmann identifies in renaissance playtexts, are embodied on stage by the actors, who, to paraphrase the RSC’s first voice director, Cicely Berry, depend on their breath, and how they apply it.⁶ While training to achieve maximum breathing capacity with the least possible effort can be strenuous, it produces a stage performance of inhalations and exhalations that appear natural and authentic. When Claudius enters the stage in Act 4, Scene 1, he marks Gertrude’s dysregulated breathing: ‘There’s matter in these sighs, these profound heaves; / You must translate. ’Tis fit we understand them. (4.1. 1-2).’⁷ Gertrude’s sighs, already or recurrently emitted and populating the stage’s acoustic and atmospheric world, have affectively impressed Claudius who now seeks to interpret them rationally: he has deciphered the sighs and heaves as symptoms of emotional turmoil, of pain or sorrow, and proceeds to identify the cause. In *The Winter’s Tale*, on the other hand, Leontes hastens to a precarious interpretation of sighs, which might or might not be actualised on stage. Amidst his paroxysmal speech when faced with the sight of Hermione giving her hand to Polixenes, he lists sighing as evidence of what he imagines to be a sexual relationship between the two:

William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006) and Jan Plamper, “The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns,” *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 237-65.

³ Scheer, 201-2

⁴ Scheer, 207

⁵ Scheer, 219.

⁶ Cicely Berry, *Voice and the Actor* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 1973), 21. See also E.A.J. Honigmann, “Re-enter the Stage Direction: Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries,” *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976): 117-26.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623, (Arden Shakespeare Third Series)*, edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

LEONTES: [...]

But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,
As now they are, and making practised smiles
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o'th'deer – O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows (1.2.115-119)⁸

In an orchestrated scene of a fictional illicit affair, the dying breath of a wounded deer, with its connotations of a woman's sexual groans, provides the crude soundtrack to Leontes's fantasy. In Cheek by Jowl's 2017 production, directed by Declan Donnellan, a frantic Leontes (Orlando James) placed Hermione (Natalie Radmall-Quirke) and Polixenes (Edward Sayer) in a pornographic performance that materialised on stage his darkest obsessions. When delivering the words 'to sigh, as 'twere the mort o'th'deer', Leontes stood above and between the couple, his hands resting on their bosoms. With the word 'deer', Hermione and Polixenes released an exaggerated and deep sexual sigh which sent Leontes sliding backwards as if he was the one expelled from their chest. The 'O' after the 'deer' in the text might be Leontes's articulation of the imagined sigh, but James's literal embodiment of an orgasmic exhalation on stage made the sigh not only audible, but powerfully visible, too. The exchange with Camillo later in the scene confirmed the sigh's promiscuous credentials: 'Stopping the career / of laughter with a sigh - A note infallible / of breaking honesty' (1.2.284-286).

The two examples of representing sighs demonstrate that emotional breathing escapes the confines of the dramatic text and flows between page, stage, and audience in unpredictable, yet inclusive, circles. Breath belongs to, and is determined by, the affective fabric of the original playtext as much as it is by the actor's present and living body, while the recycling process of inhaling and exhaling reaches out to implicate the spectators, whom, according to Sale, breath animates: 'what they receive renders them active, or rather creates in them the capacity or the potential to become that which they observe: the breath makes them "capable" by turning them all into potential actors.'⁹ Although indebted to Sale's viewpoint of how breath circulates in the theatre, this chapter focuses specifically on sighs in order to suggest ways that sighing can contribute to, and expand, current research in the

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (*Arden Shakespeare Third Series*), edited by John Pitcher (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010).

⁹ Sale, 157.

history of emotions, while enriching our understanding of the economy of breathing Shakespeare presents us with in *Hamlet*.

How exactly did Shakespeare and his contemporaries define sighs? Outside the walls of the theatres, sighing was the most popular type of emotional breathing in the early modern era, seen as an alternative to speech, a body language with the potential to authentically express one's spiritual hardships or fervency, bodily ailments and sorrows, and erotic (un)fulfilment. The widely held belief in respiration as a cooling agent for the body, originating in Western physiology with Plato and Aristotle, and the lack of any significant systematic engagement with that function until the 1650s and 1660s, meant that the most extensive discussions of sighing in scientific circles were to be found in premodern theories of the passions.¹⁰ An early example appears in the writings of Alexander of Aphrodisias in the 3rd century BC. Answering 'why doe such as are in grieffe, and in love, and in anger, sigh very oft?', Alexander argues that a sigh is actually produced when the body, due to excessive passion, forgets to act according to its regular routine:

Because that the soule and minde of such as are grieved, is turned into the cause of grieffe and sorrowe...the soule then being intentive upon that whither she moveth, doth after a sort neglect & forget to give motive vertue and power unto the muscules of the breast. Therefore the heart not receiving aire by opening of the breast, & by a consequence neither blowing not cooling, ... the heart, I say, doth force the minde and give her warning, that she would give more motion unto the muscles, and cause greater breathing in and out, and that she would take more store of colde ayre, and thrust out more excrements, and that often small breathings would performe that that one great one may effect. And therefore men of oldtime; called the word suspirio sighing, of the straitnes of the breast.¹¹

When confronted with and immersed in excessive sorrow or love, sighing is heart's solution to the negligence and numbness of the mind, seeking to restore the balance that has been disrupted by the stillness of the chest. The body appears to lose its cognitive abilities and to be sleeping, forgetting itself, until the suffocating heart moves to a sudden motion. The

¹⁰ See Mary Lindemann, *Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Alexander of Aphrodisias (although Aristotle is listed as the author), *The Problems of Aristotle with other Philosophers and Phisitians*. Edinburgh. Printed by Robert Waldgrave, 1595. (XXII, K4)

notion that sighing is an impulsive and abrupt movement of the emotionally overwhelmed heart trickles down to the Renaissance and familiar treatises of passions that customarily list sighing as a symptom of melancholy, whether in the form of green sickness or intellectual and religious melancholy. Thomas Wright, for instance, in *The Passions of the Mind* (1604) describes the effects of sadness on the body by suggesting that it floods the heart with melancholy blood and in doing so threatens to dry it: ‘The cause why sadnesse doth so moove the forces of the body, I take to be, the gathering together of much melancholy blood about the heart, which collection extinguisheth the good spirits, or at least dulleth them’.¹² The dried, dull, contracted heart, lacking moisture, has to sigh, as Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) affirms: ‘sighing hath no other cause of moving than to coole and refreshe the hearte, with fresh breath, and pure aire, which is the nourishment and foode of the vital spirites, besides the cooling which the heart it selfe receiveth thereby’.¹³ Sighs attributed to love melancholy work in similar ways as Nicholas Coeffeteau writes in his *Table of Humane Passions* (1621), reminding us of the self-forgetfulness that Alexander of Aphrodisias talks about: ‘his soule that loves intirely, is perpetually imploied in the contemplation of the party beloved, and hath no other thoughts but of his merit, the heate abandoning the parts, and retiring into the braine, leaves the whole body in great distemperature, which corrupting and consuming the whole bloud, makes the face grow pale and wane, causeth the trembling of the heart, breds strange convulsions and retires the spirits...followed with passionate and heart-breaking sighes’.¹⁴ For Jacques Ferrand’s *Erotomania* (1640), sighs are symptoms of green-sickness but they also gesture towards a process of recollection, being initiated by ‘Nature’ to rectify the absent-mindedness of ‘strong Imaginations’:

Sighing is caused in Melancholy Lovers, by reason that they many times forget to draw their breath, being wholly taken up with the strong Imaginations that they have, either in beholding the beauty of their Loves, or else, in their Absence, contemplating on their rare perfections, and contriving the meanes how to compasse their Desires. So that at length recollecting themselves, Nature is constrained to draw as much Aire

¹² Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London: Printed by Valentine Simmes and Adam Islip, 1604), 61.

¹³ Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London: Printed by Thomas Vautrollier, 1586), 158.

¹⁴ Nicolas Coeffeteau, *A Table of Humane Passions with their Causes and Effects* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1621), 171-2.

at once, as before it should have done at two or three times. And such a Respiration is called, a Sigh; which is indeed nothing else, but, a doubled Respiration.¹⁵

One such lover is Romeo, who, at the beginning of Shakespeare's tragedy is portrayed by his father as suffering from the condition Coeffetau and Ferrand describe, 'With tears augmenting the fresh morning's dew, / Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs' (1.1. 130-131), only for Romeo to confirm that sighs purge the body from the fiery state ignited by unrequited love: 'Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs; / Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes' (1.1.188-189). Romeo's addiction to love and his frequent sighing is later ridiculed by Mercutio who readily pigeonholes Romeo's heavy breathing as the traditional rhetoric of the lovesick male: 'Romeo, humours, madman, passion, love, / Appear though in the likeness of a sigh' (2.1.7-8).¹⁶ In these early accounts of emotions sighs are interpreted the moment they are exhaled as solid evidence of a complex and rather violent procedure the body has to undergo to tackle its own dis-ease. Sighing emerges as be the body's natural and instinctive cure, offering relief, comfort ('it may seeme probable that the sobbing and sighing ... if they be not vehement and long ... drawing in of fresh aire, geue also some comfort')¹⁷ and even pleasure that approximates self-indulgence ('it is certaine, that even in cares and vexation, there is also a content in the teares and sighes wee powre forth for the absence of that wee loue').¹⁸

At the very start of his performance, Hamlet challenges that sighing can lead to a reliable diagnosis of suffering and is wary of those who use their breath in instructed and artificial ways. He states so in his first appearance, where he enlists breathlessness as an actor's tool.

HAMLET: Seems, madam - nay, it is, I know not 'seems'.

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, cold mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,

¹⁵ Jacques Ferrand, *Erotomania* (Oxford : Printed by L., 1640), 133.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (*Arden Shakespeare Third Series*), edited by René Weis (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

¹⁷ Bright, 161.

¹⁸ Coeffetau, 272.

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief
That can denote me truly. These indeed 'seem',
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passes show,
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2. 76-86)

Listing what 'seems' against 'that within which passes show' the prince condemns the validity of the performative elements of grief, from funereal garments and material accessories to mournful physical expressions, including the "windy suspiration of forced breath". The *Oxford English Dictionary* marks Hamlet's comment here as the first example where the term 'suspiration' refers to '(deep) breathing'.¹⁹ In his sarcastic rejection of what he perceives to be Gertrude and Claudius's feigned sorrow, Hamlet chooses to emphasize grief's manifestation through corporal air, resulting in and from sighs, by drawing attention to its evaporating and insubstantial nature. The compressed circulation and expulsion of air from the body is identified as a universal symptom of grief, but the double meanings in 'windy' (relating to the wind and frivolous, bombastic, and unsubstantial) and in 'forced' (violently expelled and feigned), as well as the context of Hamlet's speech, render breathlessness insincere. Hamlet's response undermines the validity of forced breath as a symptom, as a sign on which meaning can be fixed; in doing so, it undermines the pneumatic subjectivity ascribed to an individual by the involuntary exhalations from their chest.

Scepticism of sighing extends from the performance of grief to the performance of love. Welcoming Rosencrantz's invitation to the players, Hamlet proclaims that the actor playing 'the Lover shall not sigh gratis' (2.2. 319) attesting to voluntary sighing as a rhetorical trope for courtship, very much in the spirit in which Mercutio taunts Romeo for his clichéd respiration. Ferrand, in his treatise on love melancholy, cites an observation by the Spanish medic, Christophorus à Vega, that 'those that are in Love, will not eat Grapes; because this kind of fruit filleth the Stomack and Belly with Winde, and this Inflation oppressing the Midriff, and hindering the motion of the Heart, disturbeth Respiration, and suffers them not to sigh at their pleasure.'²⁰ The theatricality of sighing, invoked at a lover's own 'pleasure', is what Hamlet associates with the players, and can be read as indicative of Hamlet's wider suspicion of the hypocritical potential of breath. In his playful but impatient

¹⁹ *OED* online.

²⁰ Ferrand, 116.

exchange with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act 3, Scene 2, he acknowledges breath's instrumental function:

HAMLET: It is as easy as lying. Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb,
give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music.
Look you, these are the stops. [...]
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. (3.2. 349-363)

Exposing the scheming intentions of his childhood friends, Hamlet refuses to act as the pipe or the lung or heart into which fresh air will be channelled and as such resists the manipulative force of breath, the breath that seeks to fill one with meaning and orchestrate their actions. Polonius also adheres to the instrumental purpose of breathing, when advising Reynaldo how to engage in espionage of his son, Laertes, he commands him to 'breathe his faults so quaintly / That they may seem the taints of liberty' (2.1. 31-32) uses 'breath' to refer to insincere words, and to the spread of unsubstantiated rumours.

Other characters in the play, however, endorse in their speech and their conclusions the medical model that identifies sighing as the body's act of recollection and of restoring itself to order when experiencing intense emotional agitation. The Second Quarto of *Hamlet* (1604) features a digression by Claudius, when, in Act 4, Scene 7, he persuasively enlists Laertes to avenge the death of Polonius by murdering Hamlet in a fatal duel. The digression, ten lines which do not appear in the 1623 Folio, serves to prompt Laertes to act on his love for his father, arguing that inaction ultimately leads to the passion consuming itself and the body that hosts it:

CLAUDIUS: [...]

There lives within the very flame of love
A kind of wick or snuff that will abate it;
And nothing is at a like goodness still;
For goodness, growing to a pleurisy,

Dies in his own too-much. That we would do,
We should do when we would; for this 'would' changes,
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,
And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing. But to the quick of th'ulcer.
(4.7.112-21, in the Arden)

While the extract might be superfluous to the progress of the play's performance and not always staged, the lines here remain faithful to the tragedy's preoccupation with excess of passion, and the potential of such to consume the individual incapable of moderation. The moral imperative to revenge is communicated via means of popular knowledge: editors are quick to acknowledge that the phrase 'like a spendthrift's sigh / that hurts by easing', refers to the idea 'that every sigh a man breathes costs him a drop of blood and thus wastes part of his life'.²¹ The folkloric origins of the concept are generally accepted by editors as early as the eighteenth century, with Samuel Johnson glossing this line in the following way: 'a sigh that makes an unnecessary waste of the vital flame. It is a notion very prevalent, that sighs ... wear out the animal powers'.²² Moreover, editors are often prone to draw on other examples from the Shakespearean canon where sighing is perceived as consuming blood: we find cross-references to *2 Henry VI* (3.2. 60-4) with sighs described as 'blood-consuming' and 'blood-drinking', to *3 Henry VI*, where sighs are called 'blood-sucking' (4.5.21-4), and to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (3.2.97) where 'sighs of love cost the fresh blood dear'.²³ From the perspective of humoral theory of the passions examined earlier in the chapter, the process is to be expected, as during sorrow the heart shrinks and dries with melancholy blood resulting in constant gasping for air to offer relief to the body. That sighs consume blood appears to be an inverted reading of the symptoms as the cause and the graphic personification of blood-thirsty sighs heightens the inert physical body on which violent respiration acts. While editors agree on the cultural capital of the phrase, they disagree on whether the line in Hamlet should read a 'spendthrift's sigh' or 'a spendthrift sigh'. In the first case, advocated by the Arden editors for instance and found in the original quarto, the

²¹ Not all editors agree with the excision; Thompson and Taylor have retained this passage for the Arden. Hibbard's glosses of lines 4.7. 112-21 appear in the Appendix A in the Oxford edition (2008).

²² Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton and the Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), quotation found on p. 173.

²³ See Edmond Malone, *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, Vol. III* (London, 1821), 454-6.

sigh refers to the prodigal man's regret of having spent his money. In the second case, the sigh itself is the spendthrift, problematizing a purely figurative reading and raising questions about bodies and their potential to self-destruct.²⁴ In either case, Claudius expresses the belief that constrained love turns the body against itself, disturbs its regulated breathing ('growing to a pleurisy'), and in this painful condition sighs relieve it while waste it. Despite Hamlet's principle not to waste, not to 'spend' his 'windy suspiration' in vain, the play dramatizes breath as elusive and difficult to manipulate. The 'spendthrift sigh' and Claudius's reference to it in the context of delayed and unsatisfactory action allude to what is no longer there, a 'should' that has been supplanted by a 'would', an ethical commitment to revenge that has been indefinitely postponed, a sigh that has already been wasted.

In some of its most affective moments, the tragedy follows and sustains the axiomatic belief in suspiration's wasteful energy. The example of Gertrude being upset and producing 'profound heaves' seen and or heard by Claudius as he enters her closet in the beginning of Act 4 is one of them, her sighs obvious symptoms of her misery after her encounter with Hamlet and his murder of Polonius. A memorable, even though not witnessed on stage, instance of self-destructive sighing is reported to the Polonius and the audience via Ophelia, in her account of Hamlet's appearance in her closet in Act 2, Scene 1:

OPHELIA: [...]

At last, a little shaking of mine arm
And thrice his head thus waving up and down,
He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. (2.1. 89-93)

Ophelia's lines are delivered in a state of shock and apparent distress after her meeting with Hamlet: she enters the scene 'affrighted' (2.1.72) and 'fear(s)' (2.1.82) Hamlet has gone mad. Whether the part is performed in a frantic or stunned manner, her report carries an emotional intensity that in most productions is interpolated with her disrupted breaths (due to haste of delivery and/or edginess), and makes the encounter vivid in the audience's mind. Although we can only imagine Hamlet's sigh, directors might opt for Ophelia to embody in her gestures the sigh that shatters Hamlet. Both Katie West, in Sarah Frankcom's *Hamlet* (Royal

²⁴ For a full discussion of editorial proceedings of this line and passage, see Walsh 173-4.

Exchange, Manchester, 2014), and Natalie Simpson, in Simon Godwin's production (RSC, Stratford-Upon-Avon, 2016), for instance, pointed to their stomach with tense hand gestures as they brought that sigh to life, a nod perhaps to the notion prevalent in the period that bowels are 'the seat of the tender and sympathetic emotions'.²⁵ The wasting of blood Claudius mentions to Laertes is here reinvented as the emptying and annihilation of the body, an inevitable effect of turbulent sighing, leading Polonius to declare his verdict:

POLONIUS: [...]

This is the very ecstasy of love,
Whose violent property fordoes itself
And leads the will to desperate undertakings
As oft as any passions under heaven
That does afflict our natures. (2.1.99-103)

That the body appears to be wasting itself in sighing allows Polonius to offer a satisfactory, for his purposes, explanation and to categorize Hamlet's breath under passionate, and thus violent, love melancholy. Hamlet's, and Ophelia's for that matter, disordered state is neatly regulated by her father, who seeks to make known what he perceives is hidden in Hamlet's interior: 'This must be known which, being kept close, might move / More grief to hide than hate to utter love' (2.1. 115-116). Polonius has created a narrative out of the loss of air that Hamlet purportedly performs via Ophelia's body and account.

The loss inherent in the physiological act of sighing, as well as in any attempt to determine its affective origins is triumphantly portrayed in the play's last scene. Shortly before he dies, Hamlet's final plea with Horatio is for an orchestrated sigh, one that is produced pathologically in pain but ultimately turns into the finely tuned play the spectators experience on stage:

HAMLET: [...]

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,

²⁵ *OED* online, 3a.

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story. (5.2.327-33)

The intimate proximity between the two men, justified by Hamlet's command to 'let go' (5.2.327) of the poisonous cup, creates on stage a spectacle of communal suffering and heavily charged breathing. Frequently in productions the speech is delivered with Hamlet dying in Horatio's hands, sighing heavily and intermittently due to the physical exhaustion of the duel with Laertes and the fact he has been fatally wounded by the latter's poisonous sword; an exhaustion often accentuated after physically struggling to stop Horatio from committing suicide either by shouting, running over to him, or even grappling with him for the cup, actions that occasionally leave Horatio as breathless as Hamlet. Aware these are Hamlet's final moments, the audience are invited to pay close attention to every spoken word, perhaps –depending on seating arrangements - suspending their own breathing to catch Hamlet's last words. Actors and audience are breathing together and are short of air at the same time, the theatre reality creating a shared emotional and suffocating experience. The haunting emotionality of Hamlet's final breath is found in first-person accounts such as John Keats's, who describes Edmund Kean's death as Hamlet in 1817 as a liminal moment where the body disappears: 'the bodily functions wither up – and the mental faculties hold out, till they crack. It was an extinguishment, not a decay. The hand is agonized with death; the lip trembles, with the last breath – as we see the autumn leaf thrill in the cold wind of evening. The very eye-lid dies.'²⁶ Hawkins's account of Kean's final moments on stage is less about the evaporation of the body and more about its disturbing clinging to life: 'his limbs shuddered and quivered; his hand dropped from between his stiffening lips, and he uttered a cry of nature so exquisite it could only be compared to the stifled sob of a fainting woman.' A reviewer from across the Atlantic in the nineteenth-century, commenting on Edwin Booth's Hamlet, also appears intensely focused on the moment when breath becomes air: 'you can just see the second when the breath leaves his body, by the sudden slight drop downwards into limp lifelessness.' In Simon Goodwin's 2016 RSC production, the loss of life in Hamlet's body is transformed into a powerful energy in Horatio's, as Hamlet (Paapa Essiedu) faints into oblivion and Horatio (Hiran Abeysekera) releases a heart-piercing howl. A

²⁶ The quotations from Keats, Hawkins, and the reviewer of Booth, appear in Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Hamlet* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 905. See also, R.S. White, *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 89-90, and Jonathan Mulrooney, 'Keats in the Company of Kean', *Studies in Romanticism* 42 (2003), 238-43.

reviewer's reaction to this scene captures the collective suffocation endured by all present: 'the howl of pain he unleashes when Hamlet dies in his arms smashes the air from your lungs. It's startling, unexpected, but makes complete sense.'²⁷

Sale has argued that Hamlet is asking to breathe through Horatio who will communicate his breath to the audience, yet the request is even more specific.²⁸ Hamlet, in asking Horatio to 'draw thy breath in pain / to tell my story', is asking him to sigh: to inhale deeply and exhale by articulating what has occurred. Sighing is expected to assume the role of storytelling, of representing, of constructing narratives out of one's private experience, and of ordering what has been in disorder. Horatio's dictated breathlessness at the very end, alongside Hamlet's dying 'O,o,o,o,' (the invisibility of this line in Q2, and its translation by some editors in a stage direction instead, serving as conceptual parallel with the invisibility of breath) transform the whole tragedy into a sigh produced by the theatre and into a performance that asks the audience to hold their breath and interrogate it, explore it, test its potential to act as a continuation or disruption of the internal, and then let it out in cathartic relief. At the very end of the tragedy, and considering the temporality of each theatrical production that re-ordes, rehearses, repeats, and re-enacts, *Hamlet* epitomizes the slippery significations of sighing and the experience of loss inherent in all representation. This is a play very much aware that the economy of breathing is an economy of loss, whether literal - in the sense of the deeply inhaled and exhaled air - or metaphorical. Furthermore, this loss is always inevitable but never absolute in the world of the theatre and in the world of *Hamlet*. Having witnessed Hamlet's evaporating final breath and its channelling through Horatio onto the atmosphere of the playhouse, our emotions work to sustain the illusion of Hamlet's dead body and to overlook the actor's now quiet rhythmical movement of the chest. As Carol Rutter writes with regard to Cordelia's corpse, 'speechless, motionless, reduced by death from somebody to *the* body, the corpse, the actor's body occupies a theatrical space of pure performance where it has most to play when it has least to act. It is a subject-made-object whose presence registers absence and loss'.²⁹ What refuses to allow the transition from subject to object is breath, an unmistakable sign of life outside the control of any actor, that restores the dead body of the character to its vitality even after it has exhaled its dying groan.

²⁷ Stephen Collins, "Review – Hamlet", Live Theatre UK <https://livetheatreuk.co.uk/2016/04/16/hamlet/>

²⁸ Sale, 161-2.

²⁹ Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter The Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* (London and New York: Routledge 2001), 2.

We are back where we started, with Hamlet's command to 'draw thy breath in pain'
gesturing to the desire to rhythmically regulate an experience that is repeatedly out of sync.

NB: A version of this essay previously appeared in *Reading Breath in Literature*, by Arthur Rose, Stefanie Heine, Naya Tsentourou, Corinne Saunders, and Peter Garratt (Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

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