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TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK: THE IMPLICATIONS OF
SILENCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Literature

by
Margaret Rose Jones
March 2011

TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK: THE IMPLICATIONS OF
SILENCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

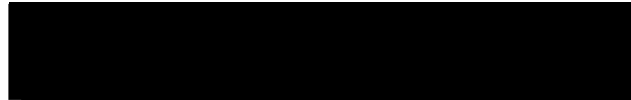
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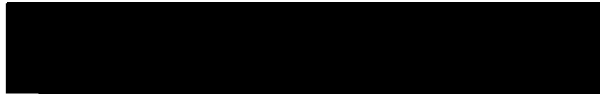
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the function and importance of silence throughout William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Along with analysis of Shakespeare's text, this thesis also reviews and analyzes three film versions of the play: Laurence Olivier's 1948 production, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 production, and Michael Almereyda's 2000 production. All of which showcase various depictions of silence while working with the same Shakespearian text and plotline. Throughout the text and film analysis this thesis explores three areas in which silence plays an important role: refusal to join a conversation, emotional distress rendering someone silent and societal limitations placed on an individual.

This thesis attempts to examine silence in its most natural forms. Throughout this examination, it is the moments without words that aid in the shaping of our understanding of *Hamlet*. In the end, we find that, while Hamlet's story remains constant, the years that have passed since its first telling and the shifts in common belief systems have altered our understanding of its

deeper meanings and subsequently the illustration of
silence and its significance with each retelling.

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CHAPTER ONE

SILENCE AND SHAKESPEARE

Language is power. The ability to use words effectively is admired. The art of language usage, or rhetoric, has been studied for centuries in order to create great thinkers and leaders. We want others to "hang on our every word," and we like to be told that "we have a way with words." However, the element of silence within rhetoric is often forgotten. Children are often taught that silence can be positive; yet, as we get older, silence can discomfort us. Silence is associated with emotional distress or possibly a lack of knowledge. Nevertheless, to fully study rhetoric, it is imperative that we realize that "speech is not only surrounded by silence but consists most of all in silence" (*Unspoken* 4). Silence can be just as powerful as words because silence is another aspect of language. In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn points out that "without speech, silence would be invisible, nothing" (3). Without words silence would be useless; but, likewise, without silence words would lose all meaning.

Speech is the tool used to create rhetoric. However, silence can be employed as a rhetorical device within speech. When a person is angry he/she may use the "silent treatment." When someone is asked to take sides in an argument he/she may choose to remain silent. Glenn suggests that "silence is a specific rhetorical art, one that merits serious investigation within rhetoric and composition studies" (*Unspoken* 2). I would like to extend her argument and demonstrate how silence needs to be recognized in literary studies as well. In life, silence is easily recognized. But how do we recognize silence in literature? Literature thrives on words. Without words we could not read. Without words we could not understand character motivations. Without words we could not decipher meaning. Nevertheless, silence is present within literature. As literary scholars we learn to read what is unwritten. We learn to interpret what is being said, and analyze what is left unsaid. We come to the realization that "silence is meaningful, even if it is invisible" (*Unspoken* 4). Therefore, it stands to reason that authors will employ silence to make their written words stronger.

It is natural to pick up a book and focus on the words, sometimes rereading to grasp meaning or due to our love for the story. Often, when rereading, we catch something new and different, whether reading a favorite childhood book or a classic novel. It is hard to pinpoint why we connect with certain books and dislike others. Perhaps we can attribute our interest in a story to the author's ability to create characters or develop plotlines. However, in addition to mastering the basic skills needed to write well, a successful author will know what must be left unwritten. Max Picard states that "speech came out of silence...and in every silence there is something of the spoken word" (qtd. in *Unspoken* on 4). While reading we must realize that silence is surrounding the words. Therefore, one of our jobs, as literary scholars, becomes pinpointing the silences and determining the effects. For, just as they never use an unimportant word, authors never use silence without reason.

Throughout this study I will focus on how William Shakespeare used silence effectively to enhance the rhetoric of his characters. Shakespeare's use of silence has been studied for years. One scholar, Philip C.

McGuire, defined what he called Shakespeare's open silences as "one whose precise meanings and effects...must be established by nonverbal, extratextual features of the play that emerge only in performance" (xv). McGuire focuses on moments when a character should speak but remains silent. I hope to expand on McGuire's work. True, the obvious silences, moments where a reader or audience member would be shocked, cannot be ignored. McGuire observes that these silences "occur most often during the final scene" (xv). Frequently, Shakespeare's plays end in some form of silence. Whether it's the joyful silence of happy unions or the everlasting silence of death, Harvey Rovine comments that "the final silence of a play is the one moment when the audience can break its silence" (98). To fully understand this issue of Shakespearian silence, I will look at one work that employs silence throughout the play: *Hamlet*.

Written circa 1600, *Hamlet* not only employs Shakespeare's artful use of words and poetry, but also displays Shakespeare's undeniable brilliance in using silence to tell a story. McGuire states that he is unconcerned with "the lasting silences into which

Shakespeare's characters lapse when they die" but instead keeps the focus "with certain silences that Shakespeare's words impose upon characters who remain alive" (xiv). For McGuire the lasting silences are unimportant, almost not worth discussion. However, in the case of *Hamlet*, there must be a focus on death. While tragedies always end in death, *Hamlet* is one that is framed by death. *Hamlet* begins with King Hamlet's passing and ends with Prince Hamlet's demise. Throughout *Hamlet*, silence is imposed on the living through secret keeping, criminal activity, and societal regulations. It is through death that words are finally heard and secrets are revealed.

For Shakespeare himself, the need to keep secrets may have been a priority. Living under the rule of Queen Elizabeth, England was a Protestant practicing country and yet there is evidence that the Shakespeare family were followers of the Catholic faith. *Hamlet* is a play that centered around much of what Shakespeare was experiencing. His son, Hamnet, died in 1596 and John, his father, was on the verge of death. Shakespeare's life, much like the play, was at that moment surrounded by death. This must have been a troubling time in his life, for "Catholics

were taught in this period to be particularly fearful of a sudden death" (Greenblatt 316). This sudden death befell Hamnet and would surely have caused Shakespeare anxiety. If Shakespeare did trust Catholicism he would worry that Hamnet died "with no time to prepare ritually for his end" (Greenblatt 319). Without the proper preparations, a soul, according to Catholicism, would end up in purgatory: a "terrible prison house, poised between heaven and hell, where the sins done in life were burned and purged away" (Greenblatt 317). Under Protestantism, however, "purgatory...did not exist" (Greenblatt 319). *Hamlet* seems to be the work of a playwright struggling between differing beliefs. Shakespeare knew the "official Protestant line" that stated that "there were no ghosts at all" but the "apparitions" some people saw that "uncannily bore the appearance of loved ones or friends" were "delusions" or "devils in disguise" (Greenblatt 320). This is why Hamlet has trouble reacting. Hamlet speaks as if the ghost is a devil, and yet this ghost is claiming to be in a place only believed to be real by Catholics.

From the murder of King Hamlet to Prince Hamlet's dying words proclaiming that "the rest is silence," this

story is shaped by contradictory beliefs (5.2.341). As time advanced, performances of *Hamlet* started taking place outside of England, and religious controversies diminished in focus, the deeper meaning has been altered or lost completely. We became fixated on the issue of a son who delays. Yet we forget, or ignore, another important issue surrounding the play. The play surrounds what is absent, therefore, we must remember that the "silence cannot be dismissed as trivial or peripheral" (xviii). Although silence in Shakespeare's other works is equally important, the silence in *Hamlet* is definitive. As I will demonstrate in chapter two, this play would not work without silence.

There is a "close connection between living and speaking" which creates a connection between "silence and death" (xiv). Ironically, in *Hamlet* this connection becomes broken in both cases. Through death, voices which were silenced in life, can be heard. We come to understand that "speech and silence depend upon each other," and that no one or nothing is without voice (*Unspoken* 7). Whether we trust the ghost, or like many Protestants of the time, doubt the ghost's validity, we discover that everyone has

a story. We may believe that the ghost's tale of murder is actually Hamlet's own delusion caused by a father's death and a mother's quick remarriage; or we may believe the ghost is truly Hamlet's father returning to seek revenge. Either way, the ghost's presence becomes less about his existence and more about the fear of what happens after one dies.

Throughout this play silence "has actually taken on an expressive power" (*Unspoken* xi). Shakespeare used his knowledge of beliefs and fears to write a play which grappled these issues. In this sense, siding with McGuire's dismissal of the lasting silences that come with death would be an impossible move when examining *Hamlet*. For death does not remain silent in this play. Silence becomes expressive and powerful in death. With death Hamlet's father can tell the truth, with death the guilty are discovered and the innocent acquitted, and with death Hamlet's story lives on.

Understanding the issues behind the written text of *Hamlet* are critical to deciphering much of what happens. However, with the exception of Shakespearian scholars, much of today's audience places little emphasis on

seventeenth century events when reading or watching the play. Therefore, over the years, *Hamlet* has become more commonly received as a revenge tragedy; albeit, one of classical status. We value this play as one of Shakespeare's greatest. The psychological battle Hamlet faces is one that has caused much debate. His inner battle, and the use of silence within the play, "can significantly shape an audience's perceptions of how the play presents those issues" and these issues "continue to trouble and divide societies" (McGuire xix). Therefore, studying film versions of this play, especially films that remove it from its original social context, help to shape our current understanding of the story.

When developing a film version of a play much has to be deciphered, especially when the original meaning of the play has been distorted and reevaluated over time. Nowadays things are often added, via scenery or flashback sequences, "in order to indicate a point of view, provide background information, establish mood and scene or announce a theme" (Jackson 29). Performance has become detailed and focused. When converting a play such as *Hamlet* into film, a director has to "worry about the ways

in which the central business of the play is approached and how it is left" (Jackson 30). Since Hamlet worries about the honesty and goodness of the ghost, many directors portray it as being imminently evil.

Much of what Shakespeare wrote involves silence. This silence, while still present in the Shakespearian language, is often lost among film productions. While studying *Hamlet* we should question the use of silence, when it occurs, and whom it affects most often because "Shakespeare's plays suggest that there exists...a silent dramaturgy" (Rovine 2). We should explore how "the silencer dominates the silenced" (*Unspoken* 41). We should ask ourselves "what happens when one needs to---or should---speak and is cut off from the possibility of speaking?" (*Unspoken* 44). All this occurs within *Hamlet*. All are silenced in some way: the ghost can only speak to Hamlet, Hamlet cannot openly accuse Claudius, and Claudius has to hold the secret of his deed. Every character, down to the guards, have their own secrets to hold. Through the text we can dissect each character's agendas, and why each chooses to remain silent. Yet, it is through performance, that we must look past what appears to have been lost in

order to rediscover "how full of meaning these silences can be" (Rovine 2).

This play has stood the test of time because of Hamlet's psychological battles. However, as the film industry has grown, there has been a need for "the ending" of Elizabethan plays made into modern movies "to show, rather than promise, something to the audience" (Jackson 31). Hence, as I will demonstrate in chapter three, each film production gives us a different story. Each director magnifies something new and different. And yet, none of them address the issue of purgatory. The issue of suicide and death is imminent, but what happens after death is usually left unexplored.

Hamlet attempts to answer the question of "whether the dead could continue to speak to the living" and, if so, "whether the living could help the dead" (Greenblatt 315). King Hamlet requests his son "play God" to avenge his murder. The ghost cannot, or will not, speak to other living beings to make the request. Perhaps due to the "reciprocal bond" that King Hamlet and Prince Hamlet must share (Greenblatt 315).

Throughout this study, I will explore the uses of silence in three categories: refusal to enter a conversation, emotional inability to give voice, and societal limitations placed on certain individuals. Since, as I have shown, social progress and interpretation in film may have altered the play's meaning, I will also explore three movies: Laurence Olivier's 1948 production, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 production, and Michael Almereyda's 2000 production. All of these films bear the title *Hamlet*, linking them to the original seventeenth century written text. However, each production highlights different aspects of the story resulting in unique responses to each film. And, although each retelling of the story displays a distinct interpretation of Shakespeare's masterpiece, silence plays a significant role in them all. Finally, in chapter four, I will conclude this study and demonstrate how examination of the literary text of *Hamlet* alone is insufficient. This text is meant to be performed and, therefore, performance analysis is crucial to a complete understanding of the play.

CHAPTER TWO

SILENCE, AS IT IS WRITTEN

One cannot examine William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* without debating the play's central theme. Is this a play about revenge? One about madness or loyalty? One of trickery, manipulations and secrets? I venture to say 'yes' to all of these and more. At its core, however, I would argue that *Hamlet* is a play about words. The plot revolves around a student who is too focused on speaking to act. It is not surprising that, like the title character, most of the players lack the ability or willingness to participate in conversation.

Prior to encountering the central characters, it becomes evident that *Hamlet* is about sounds and silence. Barnardo asks Francisco "have you had a quiet guard?" to which Francisco replies "not a mouse stirring" (1.1.10). This exchange suggests that silence will be favorable within the play. However, we soon realize that silence is unfavorable and, ironically, words are undesirable as well. Hamlet says it best when he claims to read: "words, words, words" (2.2.192). In this sense, words have become

aggravating. Words have become unimportant. How things are being said, or unsaid, has become more pertinent.

While there are several instances, and categories, of silence within *Hamlet*, I will focus on what I deem to be the three most significant. First, there are the instances of refusal to join a conversation. While it should be gratifying to be invited to speak, it seems that a refusal to comply involves more than mere rudeness. It involves a rhetorical act that speaks louder than words ever could. Second, are moments in which emotional stress renders one silent. Perhaps emotion has the appearance of being without rhetoric. After all, rhetoric implies an intended use of language or silence to obtain desired goals. Emotion is often unintentional. Emotional outbreaks are, at times, uncontrollable and, therefore, cannot be rhetorical in nature. However, emotion can often be controlled and used to one's advantage thus causing emotion to become rhetorical. Emotion is not always controlled by the person experiencing the emotion but rather can, at times, be controlled by those individuals in which instigate the emotional response. Within this project I will examine how one character might

use another's uncontrollable bouts of emotion in order to obtain their own desired goals. The third category involves the forced silence imposed upon one by their societal position. While females have the least clout within the world of the play, and will be the majority of my focus, Hamlet is suppressed by society as well. Since he is a Prince and a son, both of which place him below the king and queen, he is subservient in his position. Like emotional responses, societal position is an uncontrollable element. However, unlike emotion, those in a subordinate societal position can, often times, use their lower status to their advantage and, therefore, can be used to obtain rhetorical goals.

These three types of silence appear throughout Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. First, I will explore the moments of refusal to speak. Cheryl Glenn argues that "silencing is an imposition of weakness upon a normally speaking body; whereas silence can function as a strategic position of strength" (*Unspoken* XIX). In other words, being silent may make one appear weak, but can ultimately be a sign of strength. We must remember that a refusal to speak does not necessarily mean that a person has nothing to say.

Often the non-speaker actually has a motive for refusing to speak. In this category I'll focus on the ghost. Whether we believe this spirit is Hamlet's father or not is irrelevant. That Hamlet questions the ghost's identity, however, is of great importance. His uncertainty is the cause of his constant self-debate. If he believes the ghost, then he must kill the current king. If the ghost is the devil's apparition, then killing the king would be a sin. But, either way, the king's murder would be treason. Before we start to question the spirit's credibility, we have to ask 'why'? Why does the ghost only speak to Hamlet? Why does he show himself to Horatio and the guards but remain silent? Why does he remain invisible to Gertrude altogether? In her book, *Shakespeare After All*, Marjorie Garber attempts to formulate an answer when she argues that "the Ghost is both the shade of Hamlet's father, come to stir him...and also a kind of superego, a conscience-prodder, inseparable from Hamlet himself" (469). In other words, if the ghost is a manifestation of Hamlet's own conscience then he need not speak to anyone but Hamlet.

If we believe the argument that the ghost is actually Hamlet's subconscious, then Hamlet's suspicions regarding the ghost's true identity seem reasonable. However, the ghost does appear to others. This begs the question of how others can see into Hamlet's very being. Another issue to consider is Philip C. McGuire's idea surrounding the open silences within Shakespeare. In his book, *Speechless Dialect: Shakespeare's Open Silences*, McGuire argues that speech is "a sign of being alive and participating fully in human life" (xiii). The ghost is participating in life, and yet he is without life. It can be argued that the play is about Hamlet's personal struggles. However, the ghost plays a critical role. Without the revelation of his "foul and most unnatural murder," there is no driving force behind Hamlet's actions(1.5.25). The ghost is a constant reminder that "silence" and "death" within Shakespeare are undoubtedly linked together (*Speechless* xiv). However, the ghost's defiance of the "lasting silence" associated with death should be examined closely (*Speechless* xiv). Since the ghost does not speak to other characters, we assume that with death comes silence. And yet he speaks to Hamlet.

Perhaps this is because Hamlet's father is still alive to him. Hamlet can hear the ghost because he has the deepest desire to hear his father's voice again.

Without hesitation, because Horatio is "a scholar," Marcellus appoints him to attempt a conversation with the ghost (1.1.42). He would be the most obvious choice since, as Glenn points out, "the power to speak or to write...has been closely related to education since antiquity" (*Rhetoric Retold* 91). Horatio accepts the challenge and pleads for the ghost to "stay. Speak, speak. I charge thee speak" (1.1.51). However, the ghost disappears without saying a word. Since we have not heard words from the ghost at this point in the play, it can be assumed that he is unable to speak. Glenn points out, however, that "silence...enacts strength and power" (*Unspoken* 31). The ghost has power over these men, whether they are fully aware of it or not. After all, the minute he disappears they do nothing but speak of him. The ghost further exerts his power when he reappears at the exact moment they were fearing his presence as being "prologue to the omen coming on" (1.1.123).

At this moment Horatio demonstrates that "too much silence is rarely tolerated from those who are expected to speak" (*Unspoken* 5). Horatio is anxious, not because he sees a ghost, but because the ghost is silent. When the ghost reappears Horatio pleads:

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
Speak to me.

If there be any good thing to be done
That may to thee do ease and grace to me,
Speak to me.

If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
Which happily forknowing may avoid,
O, Speak!

Or if thou has uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
For which, they say, your spirits oft walk in
death,

Speak of it. Stay and Speak. (1.1.128-139)

Horatio attempts to persuade the ghost to speak with increasing desperation. He even demands that Marcellus "stop it" from disappearing (1.1.139). However, the ghost does not stop and will not speak. Glenn states that "when

silence is a means for exerting control...silence originates with the dominant party" and this would require "the subordinate party to explore options for breaking the silence" (*Unspoken* 32). Horatio does explore his options and decides to go "unto young Hamlet" for "this spirit, dumb to us, will speak to him" (1.1.170-171). We learn that this was the ghost's goal and, by refusing to join the initial conversation, he controlled these men into bring Hamlet to him.

In order to fully understand this issue, we should explore the reverse situation. What happens when there is a refusal to end a conversation? This situation, most notably, occurs when Hamlet confronts his mother, Queen Gertrude, in her room. Immediately after killing Polonius, he exerts control over Gertrude. He tells her to "sit you down/And let me wring your heart" (3.4.34-35). He begins his accusations, causing Gertrude to beg for silence. She pleads for Hamlet to "speak to me no more" but he continues accusing her of infidelity (3.4.94). He has control over the situation through the power of his words, just as the ghost had control through silence. Glenn states that "speech often fails us...and silence

rarely does" (*Unspoken* 4). While this is accurate in many cases, at this moment silence is failing. Since there is no indication that the characters are speaking at once or interrupting each other, this scene invariably has moments of silence for the reader. During performance, however, this scene could be one of non-stop sound. Even when the queen is not speaking we can imagine her covering her ears and whimpering.

As readers, it is easy to forget that, while the action is taking place, nearby lies a dead Polonius, forever silenced. We are dragged back to this reality when the play's first casualty, King Hamlet, reappears. He has come to remind Hamlet of his promise: to avenge his murder by murdering another. The ghost is not disturbed that his living son has murdered an innocent man, only that he is blaming Gertrude for the wrongs done. Oblivious of Polonius' lifeless body, the ghost begs Hamlet to break the silence barrier between Gertrude and himself and to truly "speak to her" (3.4.115).

Hamlet's unbridled emotions make it difficult to hold civilized conversation. This brings up the issue of silence as an emotional marker. This scene between Hamlet

and Gertrude is extremely emotional and is driven by Hamlet's murderous deed. Hamlet enters the scene with intentions of confronting Gertrude but it is not until Hamlet stabs Polonius that the confrontation becomes intense. At this point, we have seen that Hamlet is not a man predisposed to quick action. He privately debates his confusions and dilemmas weighing his options carefully. Therefore, it is shocking when Hamlet shoves his sword into the unknown, without hesitation, when he hears the cries for "help!" (3.4.23). It is further disturbing that Hamlet appears calm when he discovers his victim is Polonius. When Gertrude ask "what hast thou done?" Hamlet is almost nonchalant when he answers "I know not" (3.4.26-27).

Hamlet's rash action is troubling for a number of reasons. First of all, we have been following him for almost three acts in which he contemplates the situation he is facing. This is the first moment in which he lets his emotions control his actions. Glenn states that "any kind of stress can intensify paraphasias, the silencing of words, from the stress of the social moment to external stresses" (*Unspoken* 11). Hamlet, overcome by stress,

hears a male voice and instantly assumes it is the king eavesdropping. Since he feels certain that Claudius is responsible for his father's murder, his actions are rational in his sight. If Hamlet had been thinking logically, he might have realized that the male voice could not have belonged to the king since just moments before he was outside the king's chamber watching Claudius pray. He was contemplating, even then, whether he should kill the king.

The scene in Claudius' chamber is also full of emotional turmoil. Claudius is emotional due to his guilt, a guilt brought forth by watching "The Murder of Gonzago." Hamlet is emotional because, to his satisfaction, he has proven his uncle guilty of murder. The difference between this scene and the one that follows is the assumed volume of the character's voices. When Hamlet enters this scene, the king is praying. Hamlet, we can imagine, barely speaks over a whisper as he contemplates the situation. However, the next scene, as has been mentioned, is one of voices full of passion and anger raised in the heat of the moment. At the moment of Claudius' prayer, Hamlet believes revenge is necessary,

but he is still making excuses not to act. While he trusts that his uncle murdered his father, he refuses to act because "a villain kills my father, and for that/I, his sole son, do this same villain send/To Heaven" (3.3.76-78). Hamlet cannot bring himself to reward his uncle by killing him during prayer. This issue was of utmost importance during Shakespeare's day because England was being governed by a Protestant Queen. However, there were many who secretly followed the Catholic Church. In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt states that "the ghost has suffered the fate so deeply feared by pious Catholics. He has been taken suddenly from this life, with no time to prepare ritually for his end" (319). If Hamlet were to kill Claudius in the midst of prayer, he'd be granting Claudius the grace his own father had been denied. Therefore, if we think about Hamlet's rash deed a few minutes later, we can draw the conclusion that if Hamlet believed the voice behind the curtain was Claudius then, in his mind, even a slight gap between preparation and death would be enough to keep him out of Heaven. Whether this lack of preparation will send him to the Catholics' purgatory or the Protestants' hell is

immaterial. Either way the sinner will not go to Heaven and that is good enough.

More specifically and in addition to being about words, *Hamlet* is a play about secrets. On several occasions we see Hamlet requesting his secret be kept.

Glenn points out that

Silence and secret-keeping can appear the same, but they are not...Whereas a silence does not automatically register moral value, a secret does. Silence does not involuntarily indicate guilt or innocence, complicity or detachment, positive or negative. Keeping a secret however, registers moral value, for secrets are a means to prevent change, maintain the status quo, exert stable control over the external world and intrapersonal tensions. A secret possesses value in that it is a mystery that can be dissipated only by disclosure. Secrets are ever susceptible to threat in ways silence is not (*Unspoken* 83).

It is true that a secret can often be mistaken for silence because a secret is a vow to remain silent. Intriguingly,

as stated before, with words Hamlet is often requesting that someone remain silent. We see this when he demands that his friends "swear by my sword/ Never to speak of this that you have seen" (1.5.162-163). Therefore, the entire action surrounding secret-keeping is unique because, in order to keep silent, one must make a verbal promise. If this is an accurate claim about secret-keeping, then eavesdropping becomes an interesting phenomenon.

While eavesdropping can be an accidental occurrence, the connotation suggests something more intentional. Polonius' actions prove the latter to be true in his case since we see him devise plans to eavesdrop on Hamlet's interactions with Ophelia and then again with Gertrude. We also see Hamlet eavesdropping on Claudius during "The Murder of Gonzago." Eavesdropping becomes one issue that, while left to the imagination of a reader, can display intentional emotions in production.

On the one hand, Polonius is a faithful subject and adviser to the king. He strives to do what, he feels, is best for the kingdom. Albeit long-winded, his interactions with Claudius are full of honorable intentions. Considering the circumstances, we can assume

that he displayed the same loyalty to the late King Hamlet. This is demonstrated when he says "I hold my duty as I hold my soul,/Both to my God and to my gracious king" (2.2.44-45). If events had unfolded differently and everyone had survived, Polonius, despite his wrong doings, would likely show that same obedience for young Hamlet should take the throne. On the other hand, even if we disagree with his parenting methods, Polonius is a devoted and loving father. He does what he thinks best for his children: sending Laertes to France and protecting Ophelia from Hamlet. However, his message becomes unclear when he gives contradictory orders to Ophelia. First he tells her that he "would not, in plain terms, from this time forth/Have you so slander any moment leisure/As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" (1.3.131-133). Then he uses Ophelia to trap Hamlet by encouraging her into conversation with him. We can deduce that Polonius does not eavesdrop maliciously but because he believes he is helping.

Polonius is engaged in what Krista Ratcliffe defines as rhetorical listening when she argues that "listening is not the polar opposite of silence...listening (like

reading, writing, speaking, and silence) is a rhetorical art, a tactic of interpretive invention" (93, emphasis included). Polonius claims to "use no art at all," but he is also determined to "find/Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/Within the center" (2.2.96 & 2.2.157-159). In order to find where the truth is hid, Polonius believes that he must listen without the speaker's knowledge. However, Ratcliffe argues that eavesdropping is not a black and white issue. Eavesdropping includes "choosing to stand outside...in an uncomfortable spot...granting others the inside position...listening to learn" (*Rhetorical Listening* 105). Polonius is never shown to be an insider but, despite his protective parenting, he thrusts his daughter into the insider's position. He also does this to the queen, his superior, instructing her to "tell [Hamlet] his pranks have been broad to bear with,/And that your grace hath screened and stood between/Much heat and him. I'll silence me even here" (3.4.2-4). Although Polonius puts himself in an outsider's position, he maintains control over the situation. His last words to the queen are of much

interest because, as we see just twenty lines later, Polonius is, in fact, silenced there.

Polonius' final scene is the result of Hamlet's attempts to discover Claudius' involvement in King Hamlet's murder. In the famous play-within-a-play scene, the emotions run at record highs and yet it is perhaps the most silent scene within *Hamlet*. In this scene we see players enact a "dumb show" which is followed by an actual play. Shakespeare has successfully found the "balance between...action without speech and speech without action" (*Dumb Show* 3). The characters have become an inactive audience. After line 130 the stage directions read:

The trumpets sounds. Dumb show follows. Enter a King and Queen [very lovingly], the Queen embracing him, and he her. [She kneels; and makes show of protestation unto him.] He takes her up, and declines his head upon her neck. He lies him down upon a bank of flowers. She, seeing him asleep, leaves him. Anon come in another man: takes off his crown, kisses it, pours poison in the sleeper's ears, and leaves him. The Queen returns, finds the King dead,

makes passionate action. The poisoner, with some three or four, come in again, seem to condole with her. The dead body is carried away. The poisoner woos the Queen with gifts; she seems harsh awhile, but in the end accepts love [Exeunt] (3.2)

How long the stage is full of people and absent of sound is at the discretion of the director. This pantomime becomes more intriguing when we realize that "*The Murder of Gonzago* is characterized by directness and lack of ambiguity" while the play *Hamlet* itself has a much more "indirect and roundabout" tone (*Dumb Show* 112).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the one moment that lacks ambiguity and subtlety is the same moment that sets the motion rolling toward the play's high death toll.

While the pantomime is full of directness, we should note that the players return to perform a spoken play, which in many ways mirrors the dumb show. This second act, if you will, is often cut from production, leaving the audience with only the silent performance. With or without the spoken play, we always see that "the king rises" (3.2.261). He breaks his silence only to say "Give

me some light. Away!" (3.2.264). Hamlet views Claudius' silence as proof that he killed the former king. This scene puts Hamlet in a position of power. Glenn states that

A speaker (or writer) who self-consciously manipulates the medium solely and purposefully to ensure that the message has the most favorable reception possible on the part of the particular audience being addressed enjoys the power of eloquence as well as rhetoric (*Rhetoric Retold* 19).

Earlier we see Hamlet asking the player king if he could "study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines/which [he] would set down and insert in't" (2.2.480-481). Hamlet establishes his power and successfully manipulates the outcome.

Even though Hamlet is not verbally accusing the king, he is speaking through the players on stage. Hamlet, we have discovered, is not a silent figure, although most of his words are self meditations. However, Hamlet is in an awkward position. Social conventions silence him. He is a male and a scholar, both circumstances which give him

verbal power. Yet, despite his royal lineage, he is still subservient to Claudius, even if he once was above his uncle in power. Once Claudius married Gertrude, Hamlet lost his direct connection to the throne. He is still the "most immediate to [the] throne" but Hamlet should have taken his ascended position in the hierarchy immediately following his father's death (1.2.109). Hamlet realizes that he "must hold [his] tongue," a task which is complicated once he receive his ghostly visitation (1.2.159). He cannot outwardly accuse Claudius of murder because this action would be constituted treason and could cost Hamlet his life. Therefore, he speaks his accusations via the play which he calls "The Mousetrap" (3.2.233). Shortly after the performance, Hamlet, at least where his mother is concerned, becomes insubordinate. As we saw previously, Hamlet enters her chambers and verbally bashes her, forgetting that she is both his mother and queen.

Gertrude is downgraded as devoted mother and becomes merely a woman in Hamlet's mind and, although he may be stationed below the king and queen, societal roles appoint him superior over the female sex. Hamlet's relationship

with Ophelia truly demonstrates this issue. In her article "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare," Valerie Traub notes that the "position of inferiority required women to strive for four virtues: obedience, chastity, silence, and piety" (130). Ophelia strongly demonstrates the first three points. When we first meet Polonius and Laertes, Ophelia is not present, at least not in the written text, for entrance and exit tags were often inserted as the plays were edited. Therefore, if characters did not have lines or were not referenced by another character, they were not shown to have entered the space. In two of the performances that I will discuss in chapter three, Ophelia does enter, instantly characterizing her as a silenced woman.

Ophelia's subservient position is doubly emphasized as we hear her first lines. In a conversation with Laertes, Ophelia gives short responses to his lengthy advice. In his book *Silence in Shakespeare: Drama, Power & Gender*, Harvey Rovine states, "a silent female character could also suggest loving devotion to a husband or a father," or, in this case, a brother. It could be that Ophelia's silence results from her reflection on Laertes'

advice or it could be a simple ploy to cover up the woman inside. Traub points out that "because women generally were believed to be less rational than men, they were deemed to need male protection" ("Gender" 130). Ophelia, whether she believes she is in need of male protection or not, is shown to succumb to male power. When Polonius confronts her about Hamlet she simply says "I do not know, my lord, what I should think," to which he replies "I will teach you" (1.3.103-104). When speaking to her brother and father, her responses are short and when given direction she replies with words such as "I shall obey" (1.3.135). Only once in these early conversations is she given a lengthier bit of dialogue. When Laertes advises against giving into Hamlet's advances, she replies:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart, but, good my brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And recks not his own rede (1.3.44-50)

On paper, it appears as if Ophelia is talking back;

however, this is a moment in which directors have an opportunity to shape her character. Through these words Ophelia can be shown as the obedient, yet somewhat playful, woman that society deems she should be. She can also be shown to be a free thinking independent crushed under the societal powers of her male counterparts. Regardless of the many facets we could see in her character during performance, throughout the text she is silenced at the hands of Polonius and Hamlet.

In the famous "get thee to a nunnery scene," we see both Polonius and Hamlet downgrading and silencing Ophelia. First Polonius instructs Ophelia of her task, down to the specifics of where she should stand and what she should be reading. Even though Ophelia has twenty lines of dialogue within this scene, as readers we hardly believe any of her words are her own. After Hamlet leaves, Ophelia, alone on stage, speaks a short soliloquy in which she laments over him. Following this brief glimpse into her character, Polonius and the king enter to discuss Hamlet's behavior, all the while barely acknowledging Ophelia who, quite possibly, is crying on stage. Despite Ophelia's lack of dialogue, Polonius still

manages to silence her further by momentarily pausing his conversation with Claudius to say "How now, Ophelia?/You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said./We heard it all" (3.1.178-180). He asks her how she is but silences her before she can utter a sound. Had Polonius given her an opportunity to speak she may have remained silent since, as Rovine points out, "often silence is a condition forced upon women because the opposite alternative, speech, is not sufficient to express their deep feelings towards their family, state or husband" (41). Ophelia is conflicted between her love for Polonius and her love for Hamlet. Therefore, even without Polonius' silencing words, Ophelia lacks the power of speech at this moment since no words are adequate to justify her feelings.

In her final scene, Ophelia is finally given a voice which needs not show obedience to father, brother or lover. The problem is, she has become mad. Ophelia's situation seems heartbreaking. She is a woman who has tried to live as she should but is denied the right to marry the man she loves who, by accident, killed her father and then was sent off to England while the only other male figure in her life, Laertes, is in France.

Traub notes that "patriarchy in the late sixteenth century referred to the power of the father over all members of his household" ("Gender" 129). Ophelia lived by this idea. Polonius may not have been the best role model but he was still the ruler of the family. With her father dead, she lacks direction and, even if she wanted to, marrying Hamlet would be out of the question because he was behind the knife that ended her father's life. While all of the characters are interpreted differently in production, Ophelia is the only one that, through progression of adaptations and time, begins as a very docile and obedient girl but ends up as an extremely independent and rebellious woman.

No matter what the reason, we see silence as a multi-faceted tool that can be used to achieve a desired goal. This is demonstrated by the ghost who uses silence to obtain access to Hamlet. Silence, however, is not always a chosen objective. Like Claudius, we can become victims of our emotions and silenced by our desire to regain control. Likewise, silence inflicted by societal norms can turn us into victims as well. Societal limitations that leave us speechless can create an all-consuming

pressure, which may ultimately lead to one's demise as we witness with Ophelia. Silence becomes clearer through performance; therefore, to truly understand the power behind the silence in Hamlet, I will turn to exploration of filmed versions.

CHAPTER THREE

SILENCE, AS IT IS PERCEIVED

In chapter two I demonstrated that *Hamlet* is a play about words and, equally important, a lack of words. However, once put into performance, *Hamlet*, as well as other Shakespearian productions, increasingly encompasses the visual more than the language. Therefore, we must work harder to look beyond the special effects in order to decode the silence within. Although Shakespeare must have been well aware of stage settings and limitations, due to his "working life as an actor," he would have been aware that to his audience words still played a significant role in their experience (Astington 104). In contrast to playwrights and directors, theatre-goers, especially in Shakespeare's time, tended to be more focused on what was being said and they would have derived meaning from the actors because "the face was expected to be the actor's chief visual medium of communication" (Astington 109). However, as technology has become more advanced, the focus of the play has been reevaluated. Perhaps this is why most "performance related studies have focused on purely visual aspects" (Rovine 1).

We cannot dismiss Shakespearian films as lesser versions of Shakespeare's plays. After all, as James C. Bulman writes in *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, "the ready availability of Shakespeare in [film and video] has encouraged readers to become viewers" which, in turn, have enabled us "to recognize performative elements"(2). The study of Shakespeare has begun to shift from solely literary into a much broader spectrum which includes performance studies. Technology and media have pushed us to a point where "film and video have become today's performance texts" (Bulman 2). Yet, even through performance studies, "little in-depth attention" has been paid to silence within Shakespeare performance (Rovine 1).

Shakespeare is still being performed on stage throughout the world; however, many of today's viewers only encounter Shakespeare through film productions. We cannot justifiably discuss film versions of *Hamlet* without realizing this fact. For these discussions to be profitable, films must be treated as a different type of text. We must remember that "we are bound by the perspectives of our own time and place" and that "traditional assumptions about universality and

continuity...are themselves cultural constructs" (Bulman 3). In other words, these productions "are shaped" through the years and subsequent viewings "by existing traditions" (Keyishian 74). While *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most often performed plays, I have chosen to focus on three film versions, each portraying, at times, contradictory stories: Laurence Olivier's 1948 production, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 uncut production, and Michael Almereyda's 2000 modern retelling.

Released in 1948, Laurence Olivier's film recreates the role he first played eleven years earlier at London's Old Vic theatre. As writer, director and actor, Olivier "deployed the same reading" of a Hamlet who was "rendered passive" due to "Oedipal conflicts" (Thompson and Taylor 114). With a *mise-en-scène* full of unoccupied chairs, beds, and even entire rooms, Olivier keeps the issue of silence alive. Through deletion of entire soliloquies and characters, Olivier produces a story that is "psychoanalytic and personal" (Guntner 120). Through panning, close-ups, and point-of-view shifts, Olivier tells of a "Hamlet on his search for his Self" (Guntner 120). Olivier attempts to clarify this idea in his

opening sequence. As we watch Hamlet's lifeless body being carried off set, Olivier tells us that "this is a story about a man who could not make up his mind" (Olivier, *Hamlet*). Olivier's Hamlet is shown to be perpetually at battle with himself. A battle in which he knows that he must "hold [his] tongue" (1.2.159). As the camera shifts points of view, we are reminded "that fixed points of view are impossible" because we are immersed in a "constantly changing world" (Guntner 120). While this world is changing, Olivier isolates the story by voicing the ghost himself. It is fitting that father and son would have similar voices; however, since the two Hamlets carry the same voice, we see a foreshadow of the fate that will inevitably befall Hamlet the younger as we begin to realize that "the Ghost is both the shade of Hamlet's father" but also "a kind of superego" and is "inseparable from Hamlet himself" (Garber 469). In this case, the ghost becomes the struggle inside of Hamlet. The ghost is recognized as being "like the king" and yet it appears demon-like and distorted, giving us a sense of the world that it has left behind (1.1.58).

The ghost remains silent during the first encounter, despite being encouraged to speak. After this encounter we are immediately shown a single shot of an empty bed, that will later prove to be Gertrude's. We are presented with a world that is changing, but not for the better. The ghost, being armed, displays a world at war with itself and, with Olivier doing the voiceover, it's portrayed as less of an external war than an internal one.

When Hamlet comes face to face with the ghost, we are finally shown King Hamlet via a flashback. In the flashback scene, the king is shown to be silent. Yet, in the world that Hamlet is in, the ghost is telling his story in Olivier's voice. The ghost, separated from Hamlet in life, is now entrapped in Hamlet's very being. Hamlet listens to the story, in total silence, kneeling on the ground as if praying to a higher power. Although it is easy to dismiss Hamlet's silence when reading this scene, through Olivier's distressed facial expressions we become aware that Hamlet is about to do battle with his conscience. Unfortunately, his conscience tells him, as a loyal child, he must revenge his father's murder, but, as a loyal prince, he cannot.

The ghost appears a third time in Gertrude's chamber. Eileen Herlie portrays Gertrude as being tormented in this moment as she begs for silence. At the arrival of the ghost, Hamlet suddenly ceases his accusations. This scene becomes complex, since it is shown from Gertrude's point of view. Even though Hamlet can see the ghost, he is not the focus of the scene as we would expect. We hear the ghost's words but do not see any sign of him being present. Therefore, we are being led to believe, as Gertrude does, that "this is the very coinage of [Hamlet's] brain" (3.4.137). "Gertrude sees 'nothing'" and yet she believes "she sees all there is to see" (Garber 469). Olivier takes this idea one step further and ensures that the audience sees nothing as well. Throughout this scene we become aware that "when there is corruption at the top" then inevitably "the land and its people are likewise corrupted" (Garber 469). Olivier is presenting us with a Hamlet that is not just feigning madness, but, in some sense, is already mad. Olivier's Hamlet is stuck in a country of perpetual corruption. He escapes briefly when he leaves for England, but it is inevitable that he will be pulled back into the

corruption, for the isolation has become impenetrable and can only be broken through his ultimate death.

Hamlet is not the only one stuck in isolation. Claudius, during his confession, is placed in utter darkness, barely visible. The little visibility given us is negated as Claudius lays his head down in prayer. Hamlet enters the scene almost as if surprised to have come across such an opportunity as finding Claudius alone. Hamlet contemplates revenge during Claudius' prayer, but silently leaves as Claudius whispers "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3. 97-98). Despite Hamlet's concern that killing Claudius at that moment would send him straight to heaven, Claudius, in contrast, is sure that his prayers will do little to purge his soul of sin. We are left with a tableau of Claudius lying in complete darkness as the scene shifts to Gertrude's chamber.

It is in Gertrude's chamber that the story hits a turning point. In this moment, the lives of these characters begin their rapid descent toward ultimate silence. As we view Hamlet thrusting his sword into the unknown, we are shown a close-up of Hamlet with wild eyes.

Through this scene we can clearly identify Hamlet's "oedipal conflict" (Thompson and Taylor 114). He is alone with his mother, and because his time with her, even a time full of distress, is being usurped, he reacts quickly for the first time. This is also where, like a scared boy, he crawls next to Gertrude and informs her that he "must [go] to England" (3.4.200). In the text, this is a scheduled trip that includes traveling companions Rozencrantz and Guildenstern. However, Rozencrantz and Guildenstern have been cut from this production, causing this revelation to appear out of place. We realize that this is a case in which "what is left [uncut] has not been provided with a structure or form of its own to compensate for what has been lost" (Anderegg 6). Therefore, the trip to England can easily be glossed over, by the average viewer, as insignificant. So Olivier attempts to create a reason for Hamlet's sudden trip. After Polonius dies, as a result of Hamlet's attack, he is shielded from our view for the majority of the scene. As Hamlet speaks of his upcoming trip, the camera zooms out causing Polonius' body to become visible. Hamlet looks at the body and says, "this man shall set me packing," giving the audience the

impression that it is Polonius' murder that will cause the sudden trip towards England (3.4.211).

At this point in the story, Hamlet has convinced himself that the ghost is an honest ghost. Hamlet comes to this conclusion via the play-within-a-play scene. In chapter two I pointed out that the amount of silence during this scene is dependent on the director. In Olivier's interpretation there is absolute silence for three minutes and 90 seconds. Like many directors, Olivier chooses to cut the dialogue portion of the play, leaving us with the significantly silent dumb show. The dumb show, in Olivier's production, "heightens the dramatic tension," and we can easily tell that in this scene "delay and suspense are deliberately employed as structural devices" (Mehl 113). In fact, if Olivier had included the second portion of the play it may have lessened the overall impact.

Throughout the dumb show, we are left with a stage of silent actors who become one with the audience. Through nearly four minutes, we can rely only on our eyes. As the scene advances, we begin to ignore the play and focus on the King. Claudius becomes noticeably moved by the play

and his reactions are not lost on the other characters. As the king becomes increasingly agitated, nearly everyone's attention is glued on him. At this point only one other character is watching the actual play: Gertrude. Unlike Claudius, she seems to be enjoying the production and does not show signs of distress. It is through silence that we learn much about these characters. Even though Claudius has not confessed, we too begin to "take the ghost's word for a/thousand pound" (3.2.281-282). In addition, we are given insight into Gertrude's innocence, thus making the scene in her chambers more disturbing. Since she is the only one who seems oblivious to Claudius' reaction towards the play, we can easily discern that Claudius' murderous deed was one he kept silent from his queen, thus removing cause for her to fear the play or its meaning.

Since Shakespeare's text never clearly defines whether Gertrude was privy to the murder of her late husband, each director must choose a position. Olivier, like many directors, makes Gertrude innocent of all charges. It's understandable that Gertrude would be left out of Claudius' confidence because, in Shakespeare's day,

women "were believed to be less rational than men" (Traub 130). Likewise, women were expected to hold a virtue of chastity which included having "monogamous fidelity" (Traub 130). If Gertrude knew of the murder, then the question would be raised of whether or not she was having an affair with Claudius prior to King Hamlet's demise. Therefore, by allowing Gertrude to remain innocent, the scene in her chambers becomes more poignant. Gertrude suddenly becomes a helpless and silenced woman.

Shakespeare's play includes two primary female roles: Gertrude and Ophelia. While the play also calls for "ladies" and a "player queen," they have little stake in the story. We realize that while the play centers around a murdered king, women become the focus. The king was murdered so Claudius could marry Gertrude. Ophelia, being Hamlet's true love, is used as a pawn to play against Hamlet. We begin to realize that "frailty, thy name" truly "is woman" (1.2.146). Olivier's production is set out to magnify the oedipal complex with which Hamlet is struggling. We see a couple of servant women, who are always silently standing in the background. Additionally, the player queen, in keeping with Shakespearian times, is

played by a man. Olivier sets out a production in which Gertrude and Ophelia will be the only feminine focus.

While productions of Shakespeare's works are becoming freer through interpretations, there is still a need to stay true to the written text. Through cuts and portrayals, however, a director can take artistic liberty to share their specific vision of these women. In one production we might see a woman weakened by societal norms, whereas, the next we might see a defiant and strong-willed woman. Olivier's production shows two women that are very much weakened and silenced characters in society. This becomes apparent when we first encounter Gertrude, with Claudius, heading a meeting at which Ophelia is notably absent. In Shakespeare's play, this scene lacks the presence of Ophelia as well. Even so, in the three films I explore, Olivier's is the only one in which Ophelia is not in attendance.

Unlike Ophelia, Gertrude is given more leeway in society because she is a woman of power, although she is given little ability to assert that power. In one scene, Gertrude appears more knowledgeable than others: when Ophelia dies. To keep Gertrude silent, Olivier chooses to

show the "outdoor event by inserting a sequence" portraying it and removes Gertrude's presence altogether (Scolicov 102). The willow speech is heard in a voiceover during a montage and, since we do not see Gertrude, we can easily assume she is writing in a diary and that there is no auditor of her words.

Ophelia, unlike Gertrude, is never removed from her speeches, and yet she appears to be more silenced than Gertrude. Through Ophelia we can see a woman displaying a "body enclosed" which refers "simultaneously to a woman's closed genitals, closed mouth, and her enclosure within the home" (Traub 131). Jean Simmons' portrayal of Ophelia shows a woman who adheres to the societal regulations placed upon her. She listens and obeys the men in her life, and shows little rebellion. Only with Laertes does the true Ophelia shine through. She clings to him and childishly attempts to steal coins or snacks out of his pocket. She acts like a loving child, but one devoted to her brother.

Ophelia's voice is shown to be of little concern to the men around her. Dressed in white, with hair done in braids, we are given the impression that Ophelia is young

and chaste. Polonius treats her relationship with Hamlet as mere child's play. However, when given the opportunity to please Claudius, Polonius is quick to play Ophelia against Hamlet, despite her love for him. Ophelia, despite her own misgivings, obediently confronts Hamlet. Much like a puppet, she adheres to Polonius' instructions on her words and actions. During this scene, Hamlet becomes abusive toward her and leaves her in tears. Polonius and Claudius reenter, neither man acknowledging the young girl crying. When Polonius does finally address her, it is to say "You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said./We heard it all" (3.1.179-180). In her distress, Ophelia is further silenced. However, while silenced, Ophelia is communicating much. She is communicating loss of herself, the inability to disobey Polonius, and the inability to keep Hamlet's favor.

In contrast to Olivier's overly dark and foreboding depiction of *Hamlet*, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 uncut production is anything but dark in imagery. While Branagh attempts a feat never before done in the history of production, by staging every word of the written text, his film is still "widely interpreted as an attempt to match,

or cap, Olivier's" (Thompson and Taylor 114). However, while Olivier's version is psychological and decidedly Oedipal, Branagh's is undoubtedly "'political,'" depicting a *Hamlet* located in the Europe of the nineteenth century" (Guntner 123). Branagh "suppresses" any "suggestions of an incestuous attraction to Gertrude," leaving Hamlet's passion to be "clearly for Ophelia" (Guntner 123). Branagh borrows from all of those who came before him and we are left with a mix of "Olivier's attention to the spoken text...Welles's fascination with camera angle and editing and Zeffereilli's visual and musical romanticism" (Crowl 224). Despite all of his borrowing though, Branagh's *Hamlet* is "more obviously dominated by its political resonances. For this *Hamlet* constructs Denmark as a militaristic state" (Burnett 78). While other directors have dismissed Fortinbras and the threat of war, Branagh's "film does not hesitate to demonstrate the extent to which Denmark's power is dependent upon the cooperation of a gallery of soldiery underlings" (Burnett 78). Branagh has created a world in utter chaos and in perpetual battle. We are witnesses to internal battles

within everyone which become more powerful each time we see shots of Fortinbras' advancing army.

The vision of the ghost dressed in armor adds to this idea of a militaristic production. When the ghost first appears, like Olivier's version, it is in darkness. Unlike Olivier's version, however, it does not remain in shadows and, during Hamlet's encounter, the ghost becomes visible although the ghost's motives remain ambiguous. Brian Blessed's version of the ghost does not appear to be Hamlet's "conscience-prodder" (Garber 469). Hamlet stands while conversing with his dead father, not lying on the ground as Olivier did. He appears soldier-like, getting orders from his captain to kill off the enemy. As Hamlet follows the ghost, and speaks to it "burst of flames break through the forest floor and smoke billows around the trees" (Burnett 80). The ghost seems to have power to move all things, including Hamlet. As the ghost disappears Hamlet then falls to the ground and speaks of seeking revenge. Branagh's Hamlet seems quick to believe the ghost's story, which causes him to appear un-loyal to his father when he fails to act. However, we are given clues that this is simply an apparition of demonic

proportions and leaves us doubting the ghost and, therefore, forgiving Hamlet's delay.

Perhaps because Branagh was attempting to include all Shakespearian lines, without creating an impossibly long film, the dumb show seems almost non-existent. Although the dumb show is in Shakespeare's play and, therefore, must be included if the text is to be uncut, Branagh puts minimal weight on its significance. Furthermore it is portrayed as comical, a prelude to something more dramatic. Branagh does not use the pantomime to heighten "the dramatic tension," in fact it almost lessens the tension (Mehl 113). Branagh negates the importance of silence in this moment, a moment in which Hamlet and Horatio are set to spy on Claudius' action. Within the first few seconds of the pantomime, Ophelia and Hamlet begin to have their own conversation after which he jumps on the stage. In this "narcissistic approach" Hamlet becomes the center of attention, not the play (Thompson and Taylor 114). It is during Hamlet's speech that Claudius begins getting agitated, giving the impression that Hamlet, not the play, is the cause of Claudius rising and storming out.

Hamlet takes the king's action as admission of guilt. Later, when Claudius enters the confessional, there is no priest on the other side of the screen, which gives credence to Claudius saying "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below./Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3. 97-98). If there is no clergy member to hear his confession, then how can his soul be cleansed. To make matters more uncomfortable, through the screen where the priest should be, a knife appears. While Olivier's Hamlet stumbles across the praying Claudius by chance, Branagh's Hamlet seems to know exactly where Claudius will be. Even though the Shakespearian dialogue clouds the issue on Hamlet's hearing of the confession, Branagh's production insinuates that Hamlet heard everything. Hamlet silently debates murdering Claudius immediately yet decides against the action. As Hamlet leaves for Gertrude's chambers, we are shown one shot in which Claudius looks at the screen, as if afraid that his confession was heard by another.

In Gertrude's chamber, the ghost reappears but seems to have lost its demon-like qualities and now appears pitiful. Unlike Olivier's version where the ghost is not visible in the scene, we see the spirit in Branagh's

production with shifting points of view. When Hamlet first sees the ghost it is transparent and, from Gertrude's perspective, nothing is present. As Hamlet stands like a soldier and speaks like a child, the camera shifts to his point of view again and we see the ghost is a solid image. When the ghost begs Hamlet to speak to Gertrude, he does so without moving or turning his head. Gertrude approaches Hamlet but the room remains in view from his perspective. This viewpoint allows the watcher to trust in Hamlet's sanity, while the characters deny it. Branagh's Hamlet changes in this scene. He no longer seems like an angry man but more like a child afraid of disappointing his father. Since Hamlet, to his satisfaction, has proven that Claudius is guilty of the king's murder, we begin to see his guilt for not calling himself into action.

From Gertrude's point of view, we are left to question whether Hamlet is still feigning madness or if true madness has taken hold. The ruthless killing of Polonius also begs the question of Hamlet's sanity. In this moment, Branagh's Hamlet has identified his father's murderer and has become recklessly ready to fight.

Through Shakespeare's text, and most productions, Hamlet hears the cries for help and stabs through the curtain once, thus killing Polonius. However, Branagh's Hamlet stabs the curtain approximately eight times, with increasing anger behind each thrust. As Hamlet wraps an arm around the curtain which conceals the intruder, and proceeds to stab, the camera shifts to Polonius' point of view where we see a man who, knowing death is imminent, cannot escape the attack. Polonius' killing becomes more disturbing when we realize that "Hamlet's choices have public consequences" and "that a kingdom is at stake" (Anderegg 130). Through the act of killing Polonius, Hamlet has weakened an already weak state, because Polonius was the king's advisor and thus closely linked to the kingdom. Hamlet's anger began to build with "The Murder of Gonzago" and escalated to Polonius' gruesome murder. His anger was so fierce, at this point, it would not have mattered if Ophelia was behind the curtain yelling for help since his momentum in the killing would have been difficult to stifle. Shakespeare's text almost demands that the scene in Gertrude's chamber be full of silence. A demand that Olivier adheres to, but one which

Branagh utterly ignores. Like in Olivier's production, we are quickly removed from the sight of Polonius' dead body. It is not until after the ghost reappears, suppressing Hamlet's anger, that the camera zooms out to show the deed. The lifeless body is lying in a pool of blood, foreshadowing the bloody end that is due to befall all of these characters.

It is through Polonius' death that Ophelia's inner war surfaces. Kate Winslet's Ophelia is a woman who "is not 'honest'" and "ceases to represent any value alternative to Gertrude's" (Rutter 253). Through scenes with Polonius we are shown images of Hamlet and Ophelia in bed together. Winslet's Ophelia does not possess a "body enclosed," which causes her societal trauma (Traub 131). Ophelia has already disobeyed society by committing fornication. Therefore, upon orders of ending her relationship with Hamlet, Ophelia says via a voiceover "I shall obey, my lord" (1.4.135). She cannot utter these words aloud because she has already disobeyed.

Despite his ignorance of Ophelia's sexual activities "Polonius, as Richard Briers plays him, is no fool" and he can be strict "but he can be tender as well" (Anderegg

129). His love and tenderness for Ophelia becomes apparent after the "get thee to a nunnery" scene. Hamlet has pushed and pulled Ophelia around the room, refusing to admit his love for her. As Hamlet pushes Ophelia against a glass door, behind which Polonius and Claudius are hiding, the camera pans to an image of Polonius with sadness in his eyes. When Hamlet exits, Polonius does not ignore Ophelia's distress, but wraps his arms around her. When Polonius tells Ophelia "you need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said./We heard it all," he does not appear to be silencing her (3.1.179-180). These are the words of a father comforting his girl, allowing her to be silent, not enforcing it on her.

Winslet's Ophelia is allowed complexity. We are granted a glimpse into her past, a past which she keeps silently within. We are shown the irony of Polonius' and Laertes' warnings because the advice has arrived too late. Gertrude, however, is not permitted that same level of complexity. Through flashbacks it is hinted that there may have been a premarital affair between Claudius and Gertrude but that is the extent of Gertrude's depth of character. Gertrude enjoys one moment in which she is the

main focus: during her willow speech. As we saw with Olivier, there is temptation in using flowery imagery during this speech. However, Branagh's scene "shows a measure of self-restraint that is especially striking in view of the many visual insertions in the film" (Scolnicov 108). Branagh gives voice back to Gertrude, placing focus on Gertrude and her words, not just the death, allowing us the opportunity to truly contemplate the events that have passed.

In 2000, Michael Almereyda took a new approach to the classic text by modernizing *Hamlet*. While the story remains intact, the setting has moved to New York City and surrounds the Denmark Corporation. Hamlet, played by Ethan Hawke, is a film student who spends the movie filming and editing the documentary of his life. Additionally, Ophelia, played by Julia Stiles, is an amateur photographer whose life is documented in still images. This production moves us deep into "an end-of-millennium anxiety regarding the collapse of human relationships and the growth of personal alienation in a media-driven world of hi-tech communications" (Abbate 82).

Through this production we are shown television and photographic images of fire, explosions and skulls. We ultimately come to the realization that "what Almereyda regards as the most problematic and paradoxical outcomes of a mass media and technological society" is "loneliness" (Abbate 83). In Almereyda's version, Hamlet and Ophelia, a couple on the verge of severing their ties to one another in Shakespeare's text, is shown to be strongly connected through their isolation. Both characters, when not with each other, are alone with their technology. As in Olivier's production, many of Hamlet's lines are heard via voiceover. However, these voiceovers usually coincide with television images, causing us to focus on what is happening rather than what is being said. For example, as Hamlet says "break my heart, for I must hold my tongue" he is viewing a still image of Ophelia (1.2.159). These two are highly connected through their disconnection, and can only speak through their art.

Only Hamlet's father, now deceased, shares in this disconnection with the world and, despite being physically absent, he is always present. During the opening press conference, a photo of the deceased Hamlet, decorates the

wall. The photograph is seen behind the living Hamlet, who is standing alone, thus connecting these two through their isolation. We are reminded that "a photograph permits us to see, in effect, what is no longer there" (Jess 91). This fact is reiterated when, moments later, Horatio tells the story of his sighting, and we are shown the image of King Hamlet walking through a vending machine.

When the ghost reappears on Hamlet's balcony, he is carrying his overcoat as if stopping by for a simple visit. In this second sighting, the ghost seems to have the same limits as when in life. The ghost cannot go through walls and only enters the apartment when Hamlet opens the door. He wipes his ear as if still feeling the poison. He hugs Hamlet as if his incorporeal being has mass. However, through a background television image of fire, we are given the impression that this ghost's honesty should be questioned. In an attempt to justify the appearance, Hamlet sits and edits old home movies in which King Hamlet is seen covering the lens. It's a disturbing entity when we notice that "the camera is rejected by Old Hamlet in life" but "he later requests it

in death, as he exhorts Hamlet to 'Remember me!'" (Jess 92). The camera becomes the instrument of remembering the past and forgetting the present.

In Gertrude's chambers we only see the ghost through Hamlet's point of view. The ghost remains, clouding the line between fantasy and reality. Hamlet seems the most frightened in this scene because he is out of his comfort zone in a room devoid of video or media-driven technology. Having just killed Polonius, he is given another unexpected push into reality. In this scene we see a boy struggling to stay locked in fantasy, but being pulled into reality against his will.

Hawke's Hamlet makes two attempts to kill Claudius but has trouble committing the act. We see him walking with purpose through the Denmark Corporation and into Claudius' office only to find it vacant. Then, after confirming Claudius' guilt, we see Hamlet bribing Claudius' limo driver to leave in order to place himself behind the wheel. It is in the limo that Claudius makes plans for Hamlet's death and where he prays for his own absolution. We are inclined to believe that Hamlet heard the confession and yet he runs from the limo as if afraid.

The first time we see Hamlet actively attempting to avenge his father's death is when he produces "The Mousetrap." In keeping with the technological motif, we are shown a movie-within-a-movie. There is no dumb show but rather images of dying roses, family videos and poison jars. This screening is enough to stir Claudius' inner demons. The next time we see Hamlet take action is when he kills Polonius at gun point. However, Hamlet seems frightened by what he has done. Polonius is hiding behind a mirrored door, which is broken with the gunshot, signifying Hamlet's attempt to break through the technological barrier between himself and reality.

In Ophelia's case, the breaking of this barrier is what thrusts her into reality and ultimately leads to her insanity and suicide. Stiles' Ophelia is the most silent in these three films and yet she is the most outspoken. Through facial expressions we see blatant defiance. When Polonius commands her never to speak to Hamlet she does not utter the words "I shall obey." This rebellion is likely the result of a repressive relationship with her father. Polonius treats Ophelia as if she is a young child; at one moment grabbing her foot to tie her shoe,

the next taking Hamlet's letters and using them to his advantage. He uses Ophelia as if she were his pawn, ignoring her tears and forcing her to do his bidding.

Ophelia's eventual drowning causes anxiety due to the familial dynamic we have come to understand. In Shakespeare's play we question whether her death was accidental or intentional. Olivier clouds over the issue, Branagh brings back the debate, and Almereyda draws the conclusion that it is undeniably suicidal. One moment she is walking along the ledge of the waterfall, and the next she is fantasizing about drowning in a pool. Her tragedy is finalized for her after Hamlet and she break up. Ophelia "knows their love affair is over [and] she has to try to shut him from her mind" (Abbate 85). Her madness is less a comment on her father's murder, and more of a statement that separation from all of society is complete. Gone is Gertrude's willow speech or the gravediggers' philosophies on death. All we hear is that Ophelia "is drowned" (4.7.162).

What we notice throughout these films is that the issue of silence is always present, despite the differing stories. In Olivier's *Hamlet* we are presented with a

world in which the title character must face an internal struggle. This struggle causes him to reflect, silently, on his own battles. These silent reflections eat away at his troubled mind until death finally frees him. As we move into Branagh's *Hamlet*, we are presented with characters who are dependent on each other and yet are facing their struggles alone. Branagh gives us a militaristic Denmark in which, to survive and thrive, all must work together. However, each character is shown to have his or her own private agenda, which they must independently reflect upon and work through. With a country at such odds, it becomes inevitable that no one can survive. Almareyda uses technology to fuse these concepts of the internal struggle and external pressures that Hamlet faces. Through technology, Hamlet can express his silent desires but remains isolated by the wall the camera creates between him and his viewer. No matter how the story is told Hamlet must live in silence until eternal silence takes him.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Over 400 years ago Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first performed to an Elizabethan audience. The play showcases several issues that Shakespeare himself was likely struggling with: questions of purgatory and the afterlife, issues of sudden death and loss of a close family member, and one's position on the social hierarchy. However, as time advances, the internal spiritual and personal struggles of the author become less important to the average reader and what we are left with is a piece of literary history. So, we need to ask ourselves, why should we study this work?

We must look past the simple truth that "much of the play has passed into our common language" (Garber 466). The fact that we quote *Hamlet* is irrelevant. What we lose in mere quotation is the silence between the lines. Since every generation can relate to the basic psychological nature of the play it is essential to dig deeper. As we reflect on the masterpiece we remember that there was a "murder most foul" and yet we forget the significance of the silent ghost (1.5.27). We remember Hamlet telling

Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery" and yet we forget that Ophelia is, in many ways, a silent pawn in male games (3.2.121). We remember the dumb show but forget how the silence magnifies the spoken. As Shakespearian study progresses, we marvel at Shakespeare's use of the language and its poetic rhythms causing silence to appear less significant. We can easily pinpoint silence when studying the text or watching films, and yet, while still present, silence does not always stand out as terribly noteworthy.

Throughout this study I noted three of, what I deem to be, the most essential forms of silencing, both within the play and within the society in which the play originated: refusal to enter a conversation, emotional distress, and societal limitations. Someone who is reading *Hamlet* for the first time may easily look past some of these subtexts. This play requires multiple readings and in-depth study to fully appreciate the layers of language and silence. For instance, on a first reading we may not entirely grasp Ophelia's predicament. We may not realize that her "civic obligations prevent her from speaking and continue to deprive her of any choice but silence" (Rovine 45). In reading *Hamlet*, Ophelia's

silence seems non-existent. She is given lines in which she appears to speak her mind. However, on a deeper level we realize that Ophelia's spoken words, as well as her silence, are "not of her choosing" (Rovine 44).

Ironically, because Ophelia is silent for much of the play, she also poses the most flexible character for directors.

Ophelia's flexibility of character is one reason that performance study in conjunction with literary study is essential for analyzing *Hamlet*. Throughout the three films I studied, we saw a progression in story-telling, especially where Ophelia is concerned. Ophelia never finds her voice in any of these versions. However, as society changed so did the portrayal of Ophelia. We see her progress from being silently obedient (1948) into a woman full of silent rebellion (2000). Therefore, as literary scholars we cannot fully comprehend the power of silence within *Hamlet* without dissecting the performances of these silences. We must read the text, and watch the productions, all the while looking beyond the surface. We must look at what is written and what is unwritten and what is spoken and what is left unspoken. At its core,

Hamlet is a story of loneliness, of loss, and of fear. Yet, with each director, film or theatrical, and each actor, classically trained or otherwise, new facets of this timeless tale are exhibited as the story is retold. For the title character, this was his dying wish. Before taking his last breath, Hamlet asks Horatio to "absent thee from felicity awhile,/And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/To tell my story" (5.2.330-332).

It is unclear whether Hamlet's final statement was Shakespeare's attempt to combat the play's inherent silences or whether it was an attempt to keep this work in performance by requesting the story be retold. I would argue that it's the former. As we witness in the story, silence, in most cases, has adverse consequences. In silence we draw conclusions that are, far too often, incorrect. These incorrect assumptions can lead us into courses of action which have devastating outcomes. Through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that if we could break these silences and speak our minds much pain, loss, and devastation could be avoided. By studying Shakespeare's use of silence in *Hamlet*, we gain insight that, in order to learn from one another's mistakes, we

must speak up and share our stories regardless of how frightening or painful it may be. Only then can we progress into a society where history ceases to repeat itself.

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