First, a brief time line of *Hamlet*.

*Hamlet* was first published in 1603 in quarto. This first quarto has generally been regarded as a 'bad quarto' — a stolen copy of the play perhaps put together by actors. It is much shorter than the standard text. It runs to some 2154 lines. The play was then published in 1604 in a second quarto; this is the longest version of the play and includes some 200 lines not found in other versions. It is over one and half times longer than the first quarto, with 3674 lines.

Finally, the play was published in the 1623 Folio of Shakespeare's complete works overseen by two of his company's actors – John Heminges and Henry Condell. This version includes some 83 lines not found in the second quarto but omits some 222 lines, including, for example, Hamlet's final soliloquy. It is according to Alfred Hart, 3,535 lines long.¹

My paper, you'll be relieved to hear, is merely about one line of the play.

‘The rest,’ says Hamlet at the end of the 1604 (second) quarto version of the play named after him, ‘The rest is silence.’ (5.2.337)² Or nearly so. As editors of Shakespeare have long known, in the Folio version of 1623 published after Shakespeare's own death, Hamlet’s silence is followed by another line, or rather half line, made up of a single repeated syllable: 'The rest is silence. O, o, o, o’. Oralcy indeed, if by that elusive term we mean something akin to speech in verbal art.

This, however, is to rush on. Let’s go back to Hamlet’s apparent lack of silence in the 1623 Folio following his last line of speech proper. More than one editor has noted the inconsistency if not illogicality of the Folio’s additional ‘O, o, o, o’. How can the rest be silence if Folio Hamlet then toils away in a series of 'O' sounds? One ‘o’ might make a last moment, but four of them seem a wearisome
burden. Earlier in the last act Hamlet has argued that a man’s life may be no more than to say ‘one’ (5.2.74); now, at his death, there is time to say ‘o’ repeatedly. Whichever way we deliver the line ‘O, o, o, o’, it seems to jar against the silence we have been promised. Small wonder, therefore, that the line appears so infrequently in modern Hamlet editions.

The absence of Hamlet's 'O' in modern editions can perhaps be traced back to the edition of the plays produced by Peter Alexander in 1954. Alexander's edition did much to establish Shakespeare's texts in the post-war years and set a new standard in editorial consistency. His edition of the collected works ends its Hamlet in quarto fashion, without the 'O's'. It does so on the traditional editorial ground that the second quarto of 1604 is closer to Shakespeare's original intentions than the Folio. Hamlet's final speech in Alexander's text thus runs:

O, I die, Horatio!
The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit.
I cannot live to hear the news from England,
But I do prophesy th'election lights
On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.
So tell him, th'occurrences, more and less,
Which I have solicited – the rest is silence. /Dies

HORATIO
Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

(5.2.343-353)

No 'O, o, o, o' here, then, only the stage direction 'Dies' at the end of the line, as if to dispel any doubt about what 'the rest is silence' may mean.

Doubt, however, does linger. It does so because of the myriad-mindedness of Shakespeare's language and its capacity to resonate. After his first meeting with the ghost Hamlet tells the 'perturbed spirit' to 'rest, rest' (1.5.183), so that a distant verbal echo may be present here in Hamlet's own 'rest'. Again, Hamlet's silence at the end of the play seems to resonate to the silence of the ghost at the start of the play. Silence in the theatre, of courses, is rarely simply silence with nothing more
to it, if only because words continue to accumulate meaning if not actual sound after they are spoken. Though the printed text may rest motionless on the page, oral delivery releases new significances that escape stasis.

The quarto Hamlet, then, may not be quite as silent as he seems in the 1954 Alexander text. More recent editions of *Hamlet* have, at least in one case, renounced the quarto's taciturn ending. This is so with the Oxford Compact Edition of the plays edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor in 1988, the most controversial edition of the plays since Alexander's. Wells and Taylor are the main defenders of the Folio text, which they see as the revisionary work of Shakespeare, his final words, as it were. Where earlier editors such as Alexander looked to the quartos as their base text, Wells and Taylor repeatedly restore the Folio readings. Not surprisingly, then, in the Compact Shakespeare Hamlet dies pronouncing 'The rest is silence. O, o, o, o.'

Wells and Taylor's edition is both daring and challenging, and the case they set out that the Folio is based on Shakespeare's final revising needs to be read in full to be appreciated. The Compact Edition, however, is not a reprint of the Folio but an edition in which Wells and Taylor add stage directions when they think these are called for. There are, however, no notes to Hamlet's final words in their text and we have to assume that they read 'O, o, o, o' as speech, rather than as a covert stage direction.

This second possibility, that 'O, o, o, o' is not speech but a stage direction, is raised in the single edition of the Oxford text edited by G. R. Hibbard. This appeared just before the Compact works, but forms part of the same Oxford project. Curiously, Hibbard goes a different way from his general editors, Wells and Taylor. He edits Hamlet's speech thus:

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But I do prophesy th'election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.
So tell him, with the occurents, more and less,
Which have solicited – the rest is silence.
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He gives a long sigh and dies

(5.2.308-311)

Strangers to the world of editing may wonder about the justification for turning 'O, o, o, o,' into this stage direction. It is in fact a common practice for editors, as in the Wells and Taylor Compact, to insert stage directions either to help readers imagine the action as they are reading, so creating a kind of literary drama, or to offer suggestions to actors and directors using the text for performance. Here it is perhaps both: we are to imagine Hamlet sighs and dies, while the actor is prompted as to how to act the death of Hamlet: 'a long sigh'.

That Hamlet is thus to die differently between Hibbard's Oxford edition and the Oxford Compact Edition may, however, be a mote to trouble the mind's eye: are all aspects of the text similarly open to the variables of performance and editors? Is drama perhaps the place where literacy constantly turns into oralcy, and where oralcy reminds us of the fiction of the fixedness of print?

Hibbard sees his stage direction of the sigh not as an arbitrary insertion but rather as a 'translation' of the Folio's 'O, o, o, o' which, as he notes, 'has been the object of unjustified derision'. In translating the Folio Hibbard says he is following a suggestion of A E J Honigman about 'crypto-directions' in an essay from 1976. What Honigman means by crypto-directions is the way in which 'expletives -“oh, ah” - appear to have served as short-hand directions for a great variety of noises', a kind of signal directed at the actor to 'make whatever noise was locally appropriate'.

Support for this idea seems to come from the plays themselves, Two quick examples will make the point. The first is from Macbeth, Act four, where Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking is watched by a doctor and servant:

DOCTOR
Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

GENTLEWOMAN
She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has
Lady Macbeth's 'O, O, O' is here glossed by the doctor as a 'sigh', and it seems reasonable to claim that the two are intended to complement one another. A second example comes from Othello when he discovers his terrible error:

**Othello**

O! O! O!  
*Othello falls on the bed.*

Once more characters on stage provide commentary and directorial interpretation. Othello's 'O' is obviously meant to be a roar, and it may be that sounds on stage are frequently thus glossed. Honigman's own argument is that the ubiquitous 'O!' seems to have 'served as shorthand' for noises as various as sighs, groans, gasps, roars, weeping. 'In short,' he concludes, 'I assume that quite often what the original audience heard was not "O! – o!"', and that it will only mislead a modern reader or audience to print the dramatist's signal in this form. Hence, then, Hibbard's 'He gives a long sigh'. 'O, o, o, o' is not to be set down as text but as stage direction or prompt to the actor to sigh. How long this 'long sigh' is we are not told, but too long would lead the play into the ridiculous. Perhaps it is all best left to the actors to perform whatever works.

In his essay, however, Honigman also notes that 'the ubiquitous "O! – o!"' may
indeed have been an 'actor's vulgarisation' – in other words, an actor's interpolation in the text to gain attention in a scene.\textsuperscript{11} Recently, Tiffany Stern has suggested that Burbage, who played Hamlet, may have added the 'O' to give a grand finale to the part.\textsuperscript{12} That would make for a nice double irony. Burbage, playing Hamlet, in act three just before the play-within-the-play gives instructions to the players to stick to the lines as set down and not improvise or make damned faces. But Burbage, playing Hamlet in act five, ignores Shakespeare's text and adds a final, stagey flourish, perhaps his private trademark as dying actor. Shakespeare, revising the quarto, remembers the moment and keeps the line and makes it his own. The possibilities of this interchange between oral addition and textual incorporation, Burbage and Shakespeare, seem almost endless.

This, of course, mere speculation, and some of it has been said much better before by Terence Hawkes in his essay on Hamlet in \textit{That Shakespeherian Rag}, albeit to a different end. Briefly, Hawkes argues that Hamlet's 'O's threaten to undo our grasp of language and its domesticating process: that “O” works, wordlessly to subvert the very structure and presuppositions of written language itself'. It is a moment of paralanguage, of (quoting Barthes) 'writing aloud'.\textsuperscript{13}

Interestingly, Hawkes himself translates Hamlet's 'O's into a groan given by Burbage, with speech, he argues, finally being vanquished and turned only into sound which reaches out to us as audience in an act of 'sympathetic closure'.\textsuperscript{14} Groan, however, seems the wrong word for something so critically elusive. Similarly Hibbard's sigh seems too mellifluous, too painless for the end of Hamlet. It is the moment of death and perhaps it can only be described as 'O, o, o, o'.

There is, then, I'm proposing, a case for suggesting that Hamlet does indeed say 'O, o, o, o', and that this signals not a 'long sigh' or groan but rather the breaking of the 'noble heart' that Horatio sees before him and that Hamlet wishes for at the end of his first soliloquy: That soliloquy begins, you'll recall,
O that this too too solid flesh would melt,

And it continues it the same pained way:

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason …
… Oh most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets.
It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.
(1.2.129, 150, 156-9)

_Hamlet_ is a play about a man whose heart has been broken by grief. The signs of that grief are everywhere, not just his inky cloak. As he says, he has that within which passes show, but which he cannot speak. Finally, in the last moment of the play, that grief is finally given expression. Only 'O, o, o, o' can convey to readers and audience those oral/aural sounds of the broken heart that is Hamlet's final word.

We, of course, live an age where the idea of the broken heart can no longer be easily accommodated, where grief is rarely held responsible for death, but _Hamlet_ in common with a number of other Renaissance plays, including Shakespeare's own _King Lear_, seems to take the idea seriously. 'O, o, o, o' may thus belong to a different culture, one where human beings are more attuned to their emotions and more willing to recognise their power, and to make them speak.

By now you may feel I have exhausted all possible interpretations of 'O, o, o, o'', and that we are left with is something of a Derridean aporia, or, better, 'oporia'. This may be so, but there is a larger point behind this revisiting of Hamlet's final words. With the exception of Hawkes, the editions and critics I have cited seek to incorporate and regularise Hamlet's 'O' and the kind of culture it represents into the reasonable world of literacy where everything can be accounted for and regularised, where 'O, o, o, o' is 'a long sigh'. Even Hawkes speaks of Hamlet's 'groan' rather than of the sound 'O'. And this despite the fact that the play is full of 'O's at the start of lines, as we have seen with Hamlet's first soliloquy. It is a play
where 'O' is the very sound of the text.

The point is easy to make. Hamlet begins his last speech:

Oh, I die, Horatio!

'Oh' here is as much an actor's cue word to begin speaking as a marker of Hamlet's dying. It is of course a part of dramatic convention that Hamlet speaks his own death, but the same could be said for 'The rest is silence. O, o, o, o.' It is illogical for Hamlet to say the rest is silence and then speak, but no more illogical than speak one's death.

Such speaking after death ties in with another feature of Hamlet's final speech, and that is its concern with 'voice':

Oh, I die, Horatio!
The potent poison quite o'ercrews my spirit.
I cannot live to hear the news from England,
But I do prophesy th'election lights
On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.
(5.2.305-9)

Fortinbras is to have Hamlet's 'dying voice', his vote given by speech, but also with a secondary suggestion that Fortinbras will become Hamlet's voice. But Fortinbras is not the only inheritor of Hamlet's voice. Some twenty lines earlier Hamlet tells Horatio:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.
(5.2.323-8)

Horatio is to live on to tell Hamlet's story. In a second sense he also has Hamlet's dying voice. The end of the play is suffused with Hamlet's voice, as if each
character is to share it or inherit it. Many years ago Ernst Kantorwitz wrote about the King's Two Bodies. The end of *Hamlet*, and Hamlet, suggests we should pay as much attention to the multiplicity of voices that make up the ruler. At this point Hamlet is de facto king as well as prince and it is this dual role that Fortinbras and Horatio seem to reflect.

It will not have escaped notice that Hamlet's speech to Horatio begins with 'O' – 'O God, Horatio'. The word at the start of a speech, if word it be, is not, however, intended to define character so much as a sense of the moment. 'Oh yet defend me friends, I am but hurt', pleads Claudius as he is about to die (5.2.303). 'O my dear Hamlet - The drink, the drink - I am poisoned', cries Gertrude to Hamlet, who responds 'Oh villainy' (5.2.289-90). Nor, lest it be thought so, is this a family trait, Fortinbras, the new voice of Hamlet, addresses 'Oh proud death' (5.2.343). In a world where the king, queen and Hamlet lie dead together with the body of Laertes, Fortinbras's apostrophe seems more than justified, but it is also part of the verbal signalling to the audience of the tragedy's closure.

'O', on this reading, seems to be a peculiar characteristic of *Hamlet*. Evidence of this comes by way of contrast with *Macbeth*. Macbeth, like Lady Macbeth, dies off-stage: the absence of the tragic hero's death speech is not the least strange feature of the play's tragic form. This may also help account for the extraordinary impact of his 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow' lines, with their images of death and echoes of the burial service: they are spoken both about the death of Lady Macbeth but also apply to Macbeth himself. Beyond time and fear, Macbeth is in a world where emotions have been killed.

Much closer to *Hamlet* is the ending of *Othello* where the last scenes are packed with the single expletive 'O'. 'O treacherous villains!' (Iago); 'O notable strumpet!' (Iago); 'O, she was heavenly true' (Emilia); 'O gull, O dolt' (Emilia); 'O, she was foul' (Othello). And, as I have already noted, there is Othello's 'O! O! O!' *Othello*, like *Hamlet*, declares its tragic nature through this simple device of extreme passion and pain.
But when Othello utters his 'O!O! O!' Honigman in his edition of the play intervenes in his editorial notes to say 'a prolonged roar, not three separate sounds'.¹⁷ That, however, would not be Lear's advice. When he comes on with the dead body of Cordelia his first words to the audience are:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack.

(5.3.257-9)

Repetition is the only clear way to mark such a massive catastrophe. This, of course, does not prove the case that 'O, o, o, o' should be heard as four separate 'O's at the end of Hamlet. It does suggest, however, that in these apparently crypto stage directions there may be traces of an oral dramatic culture which we find slightly embarrassing by its use of repeated sounds or letters, by its 'writing aloud'. Barthes' term seems right just as it seems right that Hamlet should say the words set down for him, even when these rub against our idea of literary tragedy. The effect might well be melodramatic or uncomfortable, but the gain would surely be to allow us to glimpse a particular form of oral culture even as it was dying on Shakespeare's stage and passing into print.

Notes

¹ See Philip Edwards, ed., *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1985), p. 9. All quotations are from this edition unless otherwise stated and will be inserted in the text.
² See Edwards, *Hamlet*, note to 5.2.337.
⁶ See 5.2.311.1 note.
10 'Re-enter the Stage Direction', p. 123.
11 Ibid.
14 Hawkes, p. 90.
15 The Folio gives 'Oh good Horatio' for line 323.
16 See 5.1 and 5.2. The scenes seem almost overcrowded with 'O's as Iago parodies the play's tragic discourse and threatens to turn it into melodrama.
17 See 5.2.195 note.