

ALAN C. DESSEN

Much Virtue in *O-Oh*: A Case Study

The ‘O, o, o, o’ that follows Hamlet’s ‘The rest is silence’ in Shakespeare’s first folio has often been derided, but this signal is found in five other Shakespeare plays and in the works of dramatists as varied as Jonson, Middleton, Fletcher, Massinger, and Brome to indicate that a figure is dying, mortally wounded, or sick, or to generate a comic effect. Shakespeare was adept at using the tools at hand, but to understand his distinctive implementation of those tools requires a working knowledge of the theatrical vocabulary shared at that time by playwrights, players, and playgoers.

For a reader of the first folio, Hamlet’s last utterance is not the much discussed and much admired word ‘silence’ but a sound, printed as ‘O, o, o, o’ (TLN 3847),¹ and followed by ‘Dyes’. Those four Os, to put it mildly, have not fared well on the page or on the stage. A notable exception is G.R. Hibbard’s 1987 single volume Oxford edition that replaces them with ‘*He gives a long sigh*’ and adds a note: ‘In thus “translating” Fs “O,o,o,o,” which has been the object of unjustified derision, I follow the suggestion of E.A.J. Honigmann.’² Other editors rarely agree with Hibbard, and, as a result, relatively few theatrical professionals have experimented with the folio signal.³

The citation to Honigmann is to a single page of his overview on stage directions of the period where he invokes the term *crypto-directions*, ‘some of which appear to have served as short-hand directions for a great variety of noises’. In particular, he singles out the ‘ubiquitous “O!--o!”’ which ‘is sometimes described as an “actor’s vulgarisation” — as if no self-respecting dramatist would stoop to write such stuff’ — but he argues instead that ‘the metre confirms that even the greatest dramatists could sometimes write “O!--o!” etc., while the context makes it equally clear that at other times this expletive was nothing more nor less than a familiar signal’ that ‘directed the actor to make whatever noise was locally appropriate. It could tell him to sigh, groan, gasp, roar, weep’.⁴

Alan C. Dessen (acdesse@live.unc.edu) is a Peter G. Phialas professor emeritus in the department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

To make his point within a few paragraphs Honigmann introduces ten examples that include O, O, Os from Lady Macbeth and Othello (he does not cite folio Hamlet) and single or double Ohs or Oohs from *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *The Devil's Law-Case*, *The Changeling*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *If It be not a Good Play the Devil is in It*, and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*.⁵ From such evidence he concludes that 'when the immediate context gives no further explanation, the wide range of possibilities elsewhere suggests that the actor could do as he liked'. As for today's editors, Honigmann argues that they should replace the Os 'with the appropriate equivalent' just as elsewhere 'they remove actors' names and substitute character-names', so that Lady Macbeth's exclamation should be followed by '*A long sigh*' and Othello's by '*cries out in pain*'. He concludes: 'In short, 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'.

My goal in this essay is to cast a wider net in the hope of expanding the options generated by the often used multiple Os. In so doing, I will not invoke single or double Os (as in several of Honigmann's examples) which fit more comfortably into normal scansion but will concentrate upon strings of three, four, or at times even more Os or Ohs.⁶

Shakespeare's Multiple Os

To start with the Shakespeare canon, the commentators who deal with this phenomenon cite three examples: Hamlet in the folio; Lady Macbeth in her sleepwalking: 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O!' (5.1.50–2, TLN 3142–4); and Othello in both quarto and folio in his anguish before he learns about the handkerchief (5.2.198, M3v; TLN 3485). In response to Lady Macbeth's Os, the Doctor says: 'What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged' (5.1.53–4); in response to Othello's, Emilia provides: 'Nay, lay thee down and roar' (5.2.198). These items therefore suggest that in the Shakespeare canon three Os can be equated with a sigh or a roar.

Those three examples, however, are only part of the story. Later in the final scene, according to the *Riverside Shakespeare*, Othello exclaims: 'Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight' and concludes the speech: 'O Desdemona! dead, Desdemona! dead! / O, O!' (5.2.276–7, 281–2) as in the folio (TLN 3577–8, 3589–90), but the final line of the speech in the quarto is 'O *Desdemona*, *Desdemona*, dead, O, o, o' (N1r) — and this moment seems less likely to yield a roar. In the previous scene, Roderigo's reaction to a fatal wound

from Iago in both texts is ‘O damn’d Iago! O inhuman dog!’ (5.1.62, TLN 3160), but the quarto adds ‘o,o,o’ (L4r). Lear’s final utterance with which we are familiar from the folio lacks any Os, but the quarto, the only version available to readers for roughly fifteen years before the folio, reads: ‘And my poore foole is hangd, no, no life, why should a dog, a horse, a rat of life and thou no breath at all, O thou wilt come no more, neuer, neuer, neuer, pray you vndo this button, thanke you sir, O, o, o, o’ — and his final quarto utterance is then the line we associate with Kent: ‘Breake hart, I prethe breake’ (L4r).

The Shakespeare multiple Os, moreover, are not limited to end-of-play utterances. In a folio-only scene in *Titus Andronicus*, Titus rebukes Marcus for killing a fly, and his brother answers: ‘Pardon me, sir, it was a black ill-favor’d fly, / Like to the Empress’ Moor, therefore I kill’d him’. Titus’ response is: ‘O, O, O, / Then pardon me for reprehending thee, / For thou hast done a charitable deed. / Give me thy knife, I will insult on him’ (3.2.66–71, TLN 1520–6). Here, as Honigmann suggests, the tone of the delivery is left up to the actor (rage? madness? sardonic humour? playfulness?). More clearly comic though still painful is Falstaff’s ‘O, O, O!’ when, as Herne the Hunter, he is tormented ‘With trial-fire’ by supposed fairies (5.5.89, 84; TLN 2574, 2568) where the pain or anguish is located in a very different register. The variation among examples is typical of the larger picture.

Dying, Mortally Wounded, and Sick Os

Other playwrights provide examples of multiple Os for dying or otherwise distressed figures, with the sound sometimes identified in dialogue as a roar or groan. In Massinger’s *Maid of Honor* (1621), Sylli’s lament to Camiola on losing her to the king climaxes with ‘Oh, oh, oh’ to which she responds: ‘Do not rore so’ (4.5.12).⁷ In *1 Hieronimo* (1604) an assassin kills Alcario by mistake, and he dies with ‘Oh, oh, oh!’ to which another figure responds: ‘Whose groan was that?’ (4.82–3).⁸ Not linked to dying is the conning of Justice Algripe in Fletcher and Shirley’s *The Night Walker* (1611) where a figure tormented by two supposed Furies responds first with three Ohs, then with two more, with a Fury in between lecturing ‘Groans are too late’ (7.364–5).⁹

Other situations are less specific. In *The Atheist’s Tragedy* the dying Montferrers first says ‘My soul’s oppress’d with grief. / T lies heavy at / My heart. O my departed son, ere long / I shall be with thee’ and his final sound is ‘O, O, O’ (2.4.11–14).¹⁰ In Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622) the dying Alonso first asks De Flores ‘Whose malice hast thou put on?’ and dies with ‘O, O,

O!’ (3.2.16, 18); in the final scene a mortally wounded Beatrice Joanna *within* is given ‘O, O, O!’ and then ‘O, O!’ with her father onstage responding ‘What horrid sounds are these?’ (5.3.138–40).¹¹ For a sending up of a dying speech, in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607) Beaumont has Rafe enter with a forked arrow through his head and conclude his dying words with: ‘I die, flie, flie my soul to Grocers Hall. oh, oh, oh, &c’ (6.230)¹² — and the scripted ‘&c’ can enhance the comic effect by signaling either a longer sound or a spoken ‘et cetera’.

Multiple Os are also linked to sickness, pain, and sadness-melancholy. For sickness, a pursuivant in *Look About You* (1599) afflicted by a potion enters saying ‘O O O not too fast; O I am sicke, O very sicke’ and comments at his exit: ‘O o o o my Lord’ (1619, 1719);¹³ in William Rowley’s *A Shoemaker a Gentleman* (1608) a sick Barnaby enters ‘with a Kercher on’ saying ‘Oh, oh, oh,’ adding ‘I have such a singing in my head, my toes are cramped too’ (3.2.10–11, 14–15).¹⁴ Fletcher’s *A Wife for a Month* (1624) presents a more serious condition when Alphonso, burning with fever, says ‘Oh, Oh, Oh’ within and at his entrance says ‘I am all fire, fire, fire, the raging dog star / Reigns in my blood’ (5.53). As to pain, in *The Two Merry Milkmaids* (1619) a Spirit seizes a magical ring from the finger of Smirke, the clown, then departs, so the victim reacts ‘O, O, O’ (03r).¹⁵ In *The Honest Lawyer* (1615) figures disguised as fairies torment Gripe by pinching, gagging, and then robbing him, with his response ‘Oh---Oh---Oh’ (G3r).¹⁶ A more elaborate torment occurs in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater* (1618): a group of women arraign and assault Misogynos (Swetnam) in a long sequence wherein he responds with three Ohs, then two, then four, then two, then one three times, then five, and finally three for a total of nine separate exclamations (I3r–I3v).¹⁷

Os in Comedy

Os are also plentiful in comedies, as can be seen in a sampling from three playwrights. First, Jonson makes adept use of Os in five of his comedies to signal either delight or discomfort. For examples of the latter, in a climactic sequence in *Poetaster* (1601) Crispinus vomits chunks of Marston’s vocabulary to the accompaniment of multiple Os — first four, then two, then three more (5.3.500–5),¹⁸ in *Epicoene* (1609) first Morose, with his aversion to noise, twice reacts to the sound of drum and trumpets with ‘O, o, o’, and later LaFoole reacts to the tweaking of his nose with ‘Oh, o-o-o-o-o-Oh’ (3.7.46, 49; 4.5.29–30). In *Volpone* (1606) Corbaccio expresses his disappointment that Volpone has yet to make his will with three Ohs (1.4.59), and Volpone himself conveys his distress at the continuing

presence of Lady Would-be with ‘O, o, o, o, o,’ followed by ‘Some power, some fate, some fortune rescue me!’ (3.4.124, 126).¹⁹

Middleton provides comparable reactions in six plays. Examples include *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1615) where a dancing master’s complaint about a page’s performance includes ‘O, O, O, O! (etc.)’ (5.1.190); *The Widow* (1616) where the pulling of a tooth generates three Os (4.2.208); and *The Old Law* (1618) where the clown tells his old wife that according to the law she is doomed to die so that her response is ‘O, O, O, my heart!’ before she swoons (3.1.321). In *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611) a barren Lady Kix responds to her husband’s ‘we are rich enough’ with ‘All but in blessings, / And there the beggar goes beyond us. O, O, O! / To be seven years a wife and not a child, / O, not a Child!’ (2.1.134–7).²⁰

In the Caroline period Brome makes much use of multiple Os. Examples include *The City Wit* (1630) where Sneakups responds to a beating by his wife with ‘Oh, oh, oh’;²¹ *The Damoiselle* (1638) where a drunken Magdalen weeps ‘in her Mawdlin fit’ twice with three ohs (1.459); and *The English Moor* (1637) where Edmund reacts to *Quicksands*’ ‘Oh---oh---oh---o’ with ‘Why roar you so?’ and gets Nathaniel’s response: ‘It is the Cuckolds howle. A common cry about the City’ (2.71). Brome also uses Os for laments as in *The Queen and Concubine* (1635) where Andrea begins a scene with:

Oh---Oh---and Oh-ho---O and alas! O and alack for O---O---O---that ever a true Neapolitan born, should live to see this day in *Sicily!* there O-again, O Queen---O me---what wilt thou do? O---O---what shall I do? O---thou maist work and starve; O---and I may beg and live: O---but from thee I cannot live: O---I cannot, nor I wonnot, so I wonnot. (2.31–2)²²

Revisiting Hamlet’s Os

Although by no means complete, my sampling demonstrates that multiple O-Ohs can serve as the equivalent to an open or permissive stage direction in which the dramatist leaves the implementation of a given effect to the actor.²³ That suggestion in turn highlights the danger of treating any problematic moment in Shakespeare in splendid isolation from the rest of the period, as when Falstaff’s Os of anguish in *Merry Wives* correspond neatly to Morose’s comparable pained response in *Epicoene* and other moments in Jonson, Middleton, and Brome. When such a wider context (what I think of as the original *theatrical vocabulary*)²⁴ is invoked, what emerges is a tool of the trade available for a variety of uses in many different contexts.²⁵

My tour of Os does not resolve the problem of what to do with those four letters that follow ‘The rest is silence’ but does lend support to Terence Hawkes’s use of the Os to begin his critique of the editorial tradition. For Hawkes, Hamlet’s last utterance ‘is certainly not silence, but whatever range of noises and movements an actor might summon in response to these disturbing printer’s signs’. He notes that editors ‘almost unanimously suppress these moments’ by stigmatizing them ‘as an “actor’s interpolation”’ so that ‘the Prince’s terminal O’s find themselves sternly banished from the text: an odd verdict, it might be concluded, on what could otherwise rank as a perceptive gloss on the part by its first and rather astute critic, the actor Richard Burbage’. He concludes:

That we should witness speech itself finally and violently vanquished in him, hear that probing voice reduced at last to groaning, recognize in those O’s the fearful linguistic and therefore cultural consequences of Claudius’s poison, could become powerful aspects of the play’s statement. If this is interpolation, we might be tempted to say, give us excess of it.²⁶

Other readers or actors react differently. Martin Coyle argues ‘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’ — and therein lies the special appeal of such a signal.²⁷ In his 2001 *Hamlet* for the RSC, Samuel West ended ‘the rest is silence’ with a smile.²⁸ When I queried him about that choice he replied that Hamlet begins (‘A little more than kin, and less than kind,’ 1.2.65) and ends with a pun (so ‘rest’ can denote both ‘remainder’ and ‘repose,’ 5.2.358). More important, his Hamlet in his final moment had a glimpse that what lies ahead in that ‘undiscovered country’ (‘the rub’ in ‘to be, or not to be’) is not bad dreams but ‘silence’ — hence the laugh at the transcending of ‘the dread of something after death’ (3.1.64, 77-8).

Most distinctive was the staging in director David Farr’s 2013 RSC production in which Ophelia (Pippa Nixon) in 5.1 was buried in a shallow downstage grave and stayed there for the remainder of the show. A dying Hamlet (Jonathan Slinger) barely able to stand delivered ‘The rest is silence’ while moving downstage towards her and directed the Os in her direction with the first three audible and the final one whispered. The combination of the Os as delivered by Slinger with the visible presence of Ophelia set up a powerful climactic image that conveyed Hamlet’s realization of what he had done to the woman he loved and his sense of the loss of what might have been. Keeping Ophelia onstage may not have

been HC (historically correct) but generated the most creative use of the Os I have encountered.²⁹

I, for one, find appealing the notion of a Hamlet (the most talkative of protagonists) who seeks to script his own ending (as generations of editors and readers would prefer) to climax with the word 'silence' but in fact dies with an expression of pain or shock or disappointment. But that reading, although supported by many comparable O-groans, is no more valid than any other.

The moral of this tale? At the least editors and other scholars should stop faulting Richard Burbage for his supposed interpolations of such abominations into otherwise pristine Shakespeare texts. Moreover, today's theatrical professionals should have the same freedom with scripted O-Ohs as had their early modern counterparts. Judi Dench's rendition of Lady Macbeth's three Os in the sleep-walking scene, perhaps the most powerful (and unsettling) moment in my fifty years of playgoing, provides a good example. Her director (Trevor Nunn) cut the doctor's immediate response ('What a sigh is there'), so that the actress could deliver a scream (building on three breaths or stages) that emerged as a truly remarkable display of a tortured, perhaps damned soul in a production with many such moments.³⁰

My thesis has been and remains: as a dramatist Shakespeare was adept at using the tools at hand, but to understand both those tools and his distinctive implementation of them requires a working knowledge of the theatrical vocabulary shared at that time by playwrights and playgoers. Ay, there's the rub. The rest is silence — with any further Os the province of the reader.

Notes

- 1 Citations from the folio are from *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile*, ed. Charlton Hinman (New York, 1968) and are accompanied by through-line numbers (TLN). For the quartos I have used *Shakespeare's Plays in Quarto*, ed. Michael J.B. Allen and Kenneth Muir (Berkeley, 1981). Other citations from Shakespeare are from the revised Riverside edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1997).
- 2 G.R. Hibbard (ed.), *Hamlet* (Oxford, 1987), 352. The 'derision' noted by Hibbard can be seen by looking at the annotations to TLN 3847 in Hamlet Works <http://triggs.djuv.org/global-language.com/ENFOLDED/index.php>.
- 3 Sam Dale, who played Hamlet in Fall 1993 in the five-actor ACTER (now AFTLS) tour of the U.S., was aware of my interest in the Os and, when he knew I was in the audience, played it as a final expiration of breath. I suspect I was the only person in the theatre who caught it.
- 4 E.A.J. Honigmann, 'Re-enter the Stage Direction: Shakespeare and Some Contemporaries', *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976), 123.
- 5 In *Trick* he also notes 'Ha, ha, ha ... Oh-o-o ... True, true, true' but does not mention 'I, I, I, I'.
- 6 I have found no practical distinction in the original texts between the variant spellings or punctuation. Today's editors prefer O to Oh and often include an exclamation point at the end of a series, whereas in the early texts capitalization, spelling, and punctuation vary widely with no rationale that I can discern. For convenience I have therefore used many modern spelling texts (eg, the Revels Plays, the Oxford Middleton) but have also retained the original spelling in other instances. In an appendix Gary Taylor provides documentation 'that Shakespeare strongly preferred the spelling "o" without "h"'. See *Shakespeare Reshaped 1606–1623* (Oxford, 1993), 248.
- 7 Philip Edwards and Colin Gibson (eds), *The Plays and Poems of Philip Massinger*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1976). Dates attached to non-Shakespeare plays are from the third edition of *Annals of English Drama 975–1700*, ed. Alfred Harbage, rev. S. Schoenbaum, and rev. Sylvia Stoler Wagonheim (London, 1989) and are supplied for the convenience of the reader.
- 8 Thomas Kyd, *1 Hieronimo*, in *Thomas Kyd: The First Part of Hieronimo and The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1967).
- 9 *The Night Walker*, in Arnold Glover and A.R. Waller (eds), *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, 10 vols. (Cambridge, 1905–12). Future citations from the Fletcher canon are from this edition.

- 10 Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, ed. Irving Ribner, Revels Plays (Cambridge, Mass, 1964).
- 11 Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (eds), in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford, 2007). Future citations from Middleton are from this edition.
- 12 Glover and Waller (eds), *Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*.
- 13 *Look About You*, W.W. Greg (ed.), Malone Society (London, 1913).
- 14 William Rowley, *A Shoemaker, a Gentleman*, in *William Rowley: His All's Lost by Lust, and A Shoe-Maker a Gentleman*, ed. Charles Wharton Stork (Philadelphia, 1910).
- 15 *The Two Merry Milkmaids*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914).
- 16 *The Honest Lawyer*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914).
- 17 *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*, ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914), I3r–v. Other examples include from the Fletcher canon *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610), 1.71 and *Four Plays in One* (1612), 10.306, 353; Gervase Markham and William Sampson, *Herod and Antipater* (London, 1622: stc: 17401), L4r (glossed as 'Whence came that deadly groane'); Sir William Davenant, *The Cruel Brother* (1627), in *The Dramatic Works of William Davenant*, James Maidment and W.H. Logan (eds), 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1872–4), 1.183, 195; John Ford, *Love's Sacrifice* (1632), ed. A.T. Moore, Revels Plays (Manchester, 2002), 3.4.48–9, 54; and William Hemings, *The Fatal Contract* (1639), ed. Anne Hargrove (Kalamazoo, 1978), 5.2.270.
- 18 *Poetaster*, in *Ben Jonson*, C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (eds), 11 vols (Oxford, 1925–52). Future citations from Jonson are from this edition.
- 19 See also *The Case is Altered* (1597), 5.4.1, 10–11 and *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), 1.3.12; 3.1.119.
- 20 See also *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605), 4.1.92–101 and *A Mad World My Masters* (1606), 5.2.123, 128. For other comic discomfort see Henry Chettle and John Day's *The Blind Beggar of Bednal Green* (1600), ed. John S. Farmer, Tudor Facsimile Texts (Amersham, 1914), E2v; Nathan Field's *Amends for Ladies* (1611), in *The Plays of Nathan Field*, ed. William Peery (Austin, 1950), 5.1; and from the Fletcher canon *The Beggar's Bush* (1622), 2.237 and *The Maid in the Mill* (1623), 7.25.
- 21 Richard Brome, *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brome*, 3 vols (London, 1873), 1.347. Future citations from Brome are from this edition.
- 22 See also *The Queen's Exchange* (1631), 3.470 and *The Weeding of the Covent Garden* (1632), 2.59.

- 23 See the entry for *permissive stage directions* in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama* (Cambridge, 1999). The largest category of such signals is linked to the number of figures included in an entrance, as when one or more personae enter ‘*and all the rest*’ or ‘*as many as may be*’, but the device is used for many other situations, as when Webster in *The White Devil* signals that speeches of the dying Bracciano ‘*are several kinds of distractions and in the action should appear so*’ (ed. John Russell Brown, *Revels Plays* [Cambridge, Mass., 1960], 5.3.82).
- 24 See Alan C. Dessen, *Recovering Shakespeare’s Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. chapters 1 and 2.
- 25 Two comparable situations are worth noting. In the folio at his final entrance carrying the dead Cordelia, Lear’s line is ‘Howle, howle, howle’ followed by ‘O you are men of stones’ (TLN 3217, 5.3.58); the quarto provides the same stage direction and spoken dialogue but includes four *howles* (L3v). The possibility exists that the multiple *howls*, like the multiple O-Ohs, are a signal for the actor to howl rather than to speak the word three (or four) times, but supporting evidence in other plays is scarce. I have found only two examples, both from Caroline plays (Goffe’s *The Courageous Turk* [1630], Davenant’s *The Just Italian* [1632]), and in both a speaker is telling another figure to *howl, howl*. In contrast, a database search reveals more than 850 examples in roughly 220 plays of three or more consecutive uses of *ha* to denote a laugh.
- 26 Terence Hawkes, *That Shakespeareian Rag: Essays on a Critical Process* (London, 1986), 73–4.
- 27 “O, o, o, o”: Hamlet Again’, <http://www2.lingue.unibo.it/acume/acumedvd/zone/research/essays/coyle.htm>.
- 28 Over the years I have called Hamlet’s Os to the attention of a range of actors. One of them responded immediately: ‘That’s a laugh’.
- 29 In the 2017 production directed by Robert Ickes (I saw it when it had transferred from the Almeida to the West End) Andrew Scott did roll on the floor moaning in pain, but that choice may not have been linked to the Os in the folio.
- 30 I saw this show in 1978 at the Young Vic in London near the end of its three-year run and was seated only a few feet away from Dench when she delivered the Os. Here, and in a comparable Ian McKellen choice in the banquet scene, I felt the full impact of this play for the only time in my theatre-going experience. The 1979 Thames Television version available on DVD preserves at least some of the force of these moments.