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A Note on Yeats, Harold Bloom, and Hamlet's 'Heart's  
Core' (3.2.68)

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In a letter of 30 November 1922, William Butler Yeats recalls "walking through Fleet Street very homesick":

I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem *Innisfree* my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. (Yeats, qtd in Jeffares 30)

While Yeatsian in its music, evidently the poem's famous ending — "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore; / While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray, / I hear it in the deep heart's core" (10-12) — recalls more than "lake water lapping." A reflection of Yeats's literary memory, the phrase "heart's core" offers, as A. Norman Jeffares suggests, "perhaps an echo of Shelley's *Adonais*" (31), specifically its stanza 22:

He will awake no more, oh, never more!  
"Wake thou," cried Misery, "childless Mother, rise  
Out of thy sleep, and slake, in thy heart's core,  
A wound more fierce than his with tears and sighs."  
(*Adonais* 190-93)

Perhaps, though one might add that Shelley himself seems to echo John Keats's *Lamia*:

Ah, happy Lycius! — for she was a maid  
More beautiful than ever twisted braid, . . .  
A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore  
Of love deep learned to the red heart's core. (*Lamia* 185-90)

Even as it falls short of Yeats's poetic economy, the Keatsian "deep . . . heart's core" more nearly approaches the Irish poet than

does Shelley's phrasing. Still, Keats himself — and, I suspect, Yeats as well — looks to Shakespeare as to his original.

In a meditative moment prior to the "Mousetrap" or play-within, Hamlet declares to Horatio,

Give me that man  
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,  
As I do thee. (*Hamlet* 3.2.66-69)

Thus the Danish prince pledges faith in his friend's stoic character. While the phrase, "heart's core," suggests the interiority of the heart's chambers (the "cockles," as it were, of one's heart), one might also hear in "core" the Latin *cor* (that is, "heart"), whose pronunciation remains roughly homophonic with Shakespeare's English.<sup>[1]</sup> Hamlet calls attention to his own, sudden apprehension of wordplay — that is, of an audial pun that he did not consciously intend but, rather, *overheard* within his own speaking. In a sort of macaronic repetition or "cuckowspell" (Puttenham 211), as George Puttenham names the figure *Epizeuxis*, Hamlet's immediate elaboration— "ay, in my heart of heart" — translates quite literally his "heart's core," in effect, his "heart's heart."<sup>[2]</sup> Among Shakespeare's modern editors, Susanne L. Wofford offers the clichéd "heart of my heart" (Wofford 88) as a gloss; otherwise, editors leave "heart's core" unexplained and its Latinate pun unacknowledged.<sup>[3]</sup>

In his occasionally quirky and contentious *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom asserts that "the internalization of the self is one of Shakespeare's greatest inventions, particularly because it came before anyone else was ready for it. There is a growing inner self in Protestantism, but nothing in Luther prepares us for Hamlet's mystery; his real interiority will abide" (Bloom 413). Indeed, Hamlet's "world is the growing inner self" (Bloom 409), whose capacities for "self-revision" (Bloom 412) rest upon a continuous linguistic self-reflection. Thus Bloom notes

the varied and perpetual ways in which Hamlet keeps *overhearing himself speak*. This is not just a question of rhetoricity or word consciousness; it is the essence of Shakespeare's greatest originalities in the representation of character, of thinking, and of personality. Ethos, Logos, Pathos . . . all

bewilder us in Hamlet, because he changes with every self-overhearing” (Bloom 428).

Though a minor instance of such “self-overhearing,” the Shakespearian passage above offers witty corroboration of Bloom’s thesis. It should not surprise that Hamlet *hears* more, in effect *reads* more, into his own language than do his editors and poetic imitators — than even such masters of language as Keats, Shelley, and Yeats, who echo Shakespeare’s phrasing while remaining deaf to its wit. Should it surprise that such a pun has languished virtually unheard for so long after Hamlet’s speaking? There is, doubtless, more wordplay to be recovered. After all, Hamlet *speaks to himself* as much as to others, and his linguistic practice is radically private, a deliberately closed circle: witness his baffling, “mad” words to Polonius, to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even to Horatio— his *non sequiturs*, his handsaws and fishmongers and pajocks, words that tease while withholding their meaning, resisting communication. Much of Hamlet’s speech remains, in effect, a series of more or less private jokes that continue to tease and baffle readers. It is not surprising, then, that within the “world [of] the growing inner self,” as Bloom puts it, the prince’s habit of “self-overhearing” transforms Hamlet into his own shrewdest, most conscious, most fascinated, most appreciative, most knowing audience.

#### Notes

[1.](#) Note, too, the English word’s typographic resemblance to the Italian *core* (in literary Tuscan, *cuore*), as reflected elsewhere in Petruchio’s speech (*Shrew* 1.2.24).

[2.](#) Or perhaps a different figure applies: as Puttenham writes, “when so euer we multiply our speech by many words or clauses of one sence, the Greekes call it *Sinonimia*, as who would say, like or consenting names” (Puttenham 223). Again, we must note the macaronic nature of Hamlet’s verbal repetitions.

[3.](#) C. T. Onions’ 1911 publication, *A Shakespeare Glossary* (47), and the 1888 NED (later, OED), upon which Onions’ glossary is based, offer the only recognition that I have found of the *cor/core*

pun (see OED “core,” 14.b). The fourth editor of the magisterial OED, Onions (1873-1965) terms his *Glossary* “an analysis of Shakespeare’s vocabulary conducted in the light of the results published in the Dictionary” (Preface iii).

Editions that I have checked include Bevington, Edwards, Evans, Furness, Harrison, Hibbard, Jenkins, Raffel, Rowse, and Wofford. I might add, that works such as Alexander Schmidt’s *Shakespeare Lexicon* and Hilda Hulme’s *Explorations in Shakespeare’s Language* also leave the pun unnoted.

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