Hamlet is a play of confessions. Its characters repeatedly try to tell their story “aright” (5.2.281). As such, the play is also about confession and explores whether or not it is possible to tell one’s story, to be truly understood, and therefore to bring about a real communion in a religious or social sense. “O, my offence is rank”, says Claudius to an empty stage in 3.3, “it smells to heaven” (3.3.36). His confession is not simply dramatically satisfying, confirming the guilt of this Shakespearean villain in order that the plot can move justifiably toward a resolution which will inevitably involve his death. To read this dramatic moment this way is to misread it even more than the Prince who believes he comes upon his uncle in prayer. It is, most importantly, unheard. The Prince enters only after Claudius has confessed his crimes and witnesses his uncle kneeling. Claudius seeks pardon when he confesses his guilt and “strong intent”, but his search for pardon is bound to the weakness of his “stronger guilt”. Unable to imagine, visualise, or intellectually accept his own forgiveness, he remains trapped, marked with “the primal eldest curse” (3.3.37), in the place of Cain, who, in Christian tradition had become a by-word for the sin of despair and for loss of hope in the possibility of one’s own salvation. The spiritual bind that Claudius exemplifies, I will argue, is therefore the very fact that he speaks to an empty stage and gives a confession that solicits no response. “Unheardness” is what makes the prayer scene so problematic, either so quiet, so easily overlooked, and therefore subject to directors’ cuts, or so pious and therefore complicated in the face of the conventions of villainy. Franco Zeffirelli, for example, cut all but the first two lines of Claudius’s soliloquy—the confession and only the confession—from his film version in 1990. Kenneth Branagh’s frenetic interpretation followed in 1996 giving full reign to the text, accentuating its confessional quality by playing the scene within the enclosed space of a Catholic confessional. Yet, while the confessional subtext was unmistakable, it was overlaid (or outplayed) by the phallic suggestion of a blade inching its way through the confessional screen toward the king’s ear. A more recent UK production in Lancaster Castle had Claudius laugh mockingly at his pious reflections a moment
earlier in the manner of Richard III. And perhaps the most successful production, in this author’s view, was the recent BBC production starring David Tennant and Patrick Stewart, giving full due to Hamlet’s conflicted desire without upstaging Claudius’s spiritual vexation.1 Problematic as it may be, this quiet scene is the lynchpin of the play’s programme of incertitude, for it is the point when the plot divides observers on the ‘inside’, and what they ‘know’, from the audience who are observers on the ‘outside’. Further, Claudius’s confession comes as the centrepiece in a set of three juxtaposed confessional scenes, sandwiched between the play-within-the-play in 3.2, meant to reveal and thereby ensnare the conscience of the king, and Hamlet’s exuberant and deeply threatening interrogation of his mother in her “closet” in 3.4.2 Though each confessional scene uses a different method, they all interrogate the meaning of interiority only to fail in doing so. Together these scenes, with Claudius’s confession as their key, underscore what is one of the play’s principal concerns: depicting “that within which passeth show” as a thing which, if it exists at all, remains in silence and is, finally, unknowable.

If Claudius’s confession is a failure, and that is what he asserts that it is, we ought to be able to look more broadly at why it fails, why Shakespeare depicts it as such, and what function it serves in a play where so many fail to tell their story “aright” (5.2.281). The failure flies in the face of what was a doctrinal commonplace: that God is willing to forgive any sinner, for as Thomas Becon insisted in his popular devotional text, *The Sicke Manne’s Salve*, “we behold His tender mercy and loving kindness toward penitent sinners, and how ready he is to forfeeve, whomsoever we tourne unto him”.3 This chapter will examine Claudius’s confession and failure in light of Jacques Derrida’s examination of *The Confessions* of St. Augustine, which offers a valuable theoretical framework for confession as an ideal. Before that, however, I want to turn to the culture of confession that surrounded the play’s moment of production, principally the most notorious confession of them all, that of the Earl of Essex, in order to suggest why

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2 The word occurs in 3.3.27.