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Radio At Home: BBC Drama and the Domestic Listener 1935-1942

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Radio At Home: BBC Drama and the Domestic Listener 1935-1942.

One of the most pressing challenges facing radio studies in the modernist period is the need to understand the radio event as a complex interface with, not just technical, textual and institutional processes, but also the circumstances of listenership. Rather than positioning the listener as a fixed site of reading she should be understood as an active and instantiated subjectivity who mobilises the meanings of radio. I am concerned here with understanding what kind of listening subjects there were for radio drama in Britain before and at the outbreak of the Second World War, how they intersected with contemporary conceptions of the listener, and what situations (both private and political) came to be meaningful in the event of listening.

The following pages consider radio drama on the BBC in the 1930s and early 1940s, a genre through which, as I demonstrate below, particular questions about nation, home, decency and morality were articulated. For Neil Verma it is wartime radio drama that provides the pre-eminent site for exploring the workings of this medium in an era that saw an unprecedented multiplication of information, opinion, propaganda and persuasion. He argues that ‘if 1940s culture indeed featured an excess of messages, and radio was the premiere manner in which these messages were relayed, then one way to make the most of this situation is to figure out how words and sounds “work” in the wartime radio plays, because the genre is a site in which theory meets practice’.¹ Verma’s focus is on American radio drama and, despite some claims to the contrary, his analysis often supposes a pre-existing listener who acts upon the radio broadcast in a consistent and predictable way. My discussion examines BBC drama that almost coincidentally becomes wartime drama or only retrospectively has any relationship to the Second World War, and drama whose meanings and messages are available for heterogenous listening situations. The democratic elitism of the BBC may have posited an ideal listener for programmes such as broadcast drama, but even when this ideal was approximated the way the word and sounds worked at the site of listening was a contingent and varied process. The audience for BBC radio drama in this period should also be considered as a potential ‘listening public’ as Kate Lacey defines it, an audience who necessarily participates in the ‘reflexive circulation of discourse’ rather than being a fixed point

of reception for the textual dynamics of radio broadcast drama.² For Lacey ‘the act of listening is not straightforwardly determined by any particular media text in the moment of its apprehension, but is part of an active contextualizing and framing on the part of the listener’.³ It is these contextualised and contextualising listeners I will be considering in their encounters with BBC radio drama in the lead up to and opening years of the Second World War.

To explore the listener for BBC radio drama it is important to first fully consider her listening and what it comprises. Drama on the radio is constituted as and by sound and this is its uniqueness; that sound is as concrete as the audience who listens. Jonathan Sterne describes it most aptly writing that ‘we must consider the constitution of sound as a thing and the listening subject as a social and physical being,’ going further to explain that

Sound in itself is always shaped by and through its exteriors, even as it acts on and within them. Sound reproduction as we know it depends on a whole set of phenomena that we would not necessarily have anything to do with sound. Capitalism, cities, industries, the medicalization of the human body, colonialism, the emergence of a new middle class, and a whole host of other phenomena turnout to be vital elements of the history of sound—and sound turns out to be a vital element of their history. To think the terms *sound* and *modernity* together is to conceive of sound as a variable inside a history made of variables.⁴

As Sterne highlights, sound is constituted by the exteriors of modernity, a modernity which also constitutes and regulates the subject who listens. Listening, as opposed to hearing, is a distinct relation to sound, one which, in Roland Barthes’ description, makes ‘what was confused and undifferentiated become distinct and pertinent.’⁵

Moreover

[i]t is doubtless by this notion of territory (or of appropriated, familiar, domestic space) that we can best grasp the function of listening, insofar as territory can be essentially defined as the space of security.’⁶

Listening for meaning thus enacts a form of territorialisation, something John Tebbutt points out in his account of Australian educational and media practices.⁷ This conception of listening as the marking of a territory that is familiar and domesticated, of making a territory by acting upon it, is useful for thinking through British radio listening in the years preceding, and at the outbreak of, the Second World War when territorial actions were particularly fraught. And it is particularly helpful for conceptualising the effects of BBC radio drama in the period, a broadcast genre that requires, as will be discussed below, a particular form of listening. The BBC under John Reith was very clear about the ‘ethical obligation on the part of the listener to *make sense* of the broadcast fare as a member of the public’,⁸ and radio drama was a pre-eminent form for this kind of ethical, attentive listening. Not only was drama in the period – both original drama, theatrical broadcasts and adaptations of literary classics – intended to counter the anti-democratic passivity of ‘tap listening’, but it was bound up inextricably with the stories being told about the British nation and its individual subjects in a time of crisis. Nevertheless, the territories of meaning marked out by the listening subjects were potentially as plural as the listening situations they inhabited.

In the period under discussion here crucial changes in the form of radio drama were underway, coinciding with a novel turn, in both Britain and the USA, to the study of and research into the positions and choices of the radio audience. In his discussion of American radio drama Verma identifies what he sees as a key formal shift with the two ‘audiopositions’ which defined the aesthetics of the radio play in the 1930s – the ‘intimate’ first-person singular and the ‘kaleidosonic’ public and broad – giving way in the 1940s to a focus on psychology, the psyche and the inner human life.⁹ For Verma this aesthetic shift is related to wartime conditions in a conceptual way; the uncertainties of the inner life emerging as a point of articulation in a world riven by the Second World War. In contrast the aesthetics of BBC radio drama were subject to the very material exigencies of wartime; Gielgud was forced to shelve his ‘Experimental Hour’, which had been inspired by the Theatre Workshop of the Columbia Broadcasting System in the USA, with the outbreak of war in 1939, the restriction on plays and the focus of technological innovation elsewhere meant that the dramatic control panel fell out of use,¹⁰ and the Drama Department was moved from London to Evesham and then to Manchester. Though the BBC Drama Department continued to produce original drama and adaptations of literary classics

the rehearsal time for broadcasts fell, and a memorandum from Gielgud highlights the detrimental effects of the war:

Owing to difficulties of studio accommodation and other technical handicaps, together with a considerably increased all-over dramatic output, [we have] deliberately lowered certain of our production standards.¹¹

A change in style and production standards in BBC drama in this period should be read as a result of material circumstances rather than a conceptual shift, with a move away from non-Naturalist drama and the *kaleidosonic* form simply a result of accommodation and studio facilities. Simultaneously the listening audience for this drama grew in importance, postulated as a collective audience for radiogenic broadcasts that could potentially reinforce the cultural capital and democratic standing of the BBC, and by connection the nation that it served.

Though the budget and technical facilities for BBC radio drama were limited, the audience was not; as D. L. LeMahieu details ‘by 1935 98 percent of the [British] population had some access to wireless programmes.’¹² Moreover, as the hostilities intensified in 1941, the capacity for radio drama to communicate to what Gielgud termed ‘the nation as a whole’ increased:

Blackout combined with *blitz* to keep people at home. Difficulties of transport and closing of theatres robbed people of their usual theatrical entertainment. And literally thousands of listeners who had never bothered to give serious attention to that type of radio programme which must demand from the audience both attention and imagination found themselves making these necessary contributions to their own enjoyment simply because they had little or no alternative.¹³

Gielgud’s description highlights the attention and imagination that the radio listener must invest in a drama and sees a real benefit in wartime conditions overriding any dislike of ‘serious’ radio programming. The listener is of interest to Gielgud here because he identifies a significant new audience for drama who could have their radio listening habits improved through necessity, rather than choice. But the BBC itself had already, three years before the outbreak of war, turned its attention to

understanding exactly what the behaviours and preferences of its audience were. Begun in October 1936, listener research, carried out by the Listener Research Section (expanded as the Listener Research Department with the outbreak of the Second World War) provided a record of the audiences for BBC radio broadcasting, alongside an invaluable picture of the tastes and habits of these audiences in their homes.

Although John Reith, Director-General of the BBC until 1938, was sceptical of the utility and effect of audience research,¹⁴ it was supported by influential voices, including Val Gielgud and Hilda Matheson (the BBC Director of Talks 1927-31), and in 1936 the BBC General Advisory Council decided to establish a programme of research to be organised by Robert Silvey. In his account of the Listener Research Department, Silvey points to the issues of class that concerned many at the BBC,¹⁵ and argues that one of the intentions of listener research was to enable the corporation to fulfil its ‘obligation to the whole of its public’,¹⁶ by better understanding the nature of that public.

It was Drama and Features, the section under Gielgud’s directorship, that was first subject to targeted listener research, with Silvey recruiting a ‘Drama Panel’ of 350 listeners to provide, on questionnaires, their responses to any of the forty-seven productions broadcast during the four month duration of the census in 1937. Silvey’s description of the indicative panel member as a ‘reasonably intelligent lay listener’,¹⁷ belies the actual constitution of the panel which included ‘among others, civil servants, miners, retired army officers, weavers, shop assistants, schools teachers, working class housewives, unemployed and many other occupational groups’.¹⁸ This diversity was, however, simultaneously conceived as a closed community subject to potential disruption or invasion— for Silvey it was crucial that questionnaire responses only came from those who would be listening anyway to a broadcast drama for, in his words ‘anyone who listened to a play solely in order to answer our questionnaire was *ipso facto* an intruder’.¹⁹ There is a real tension here between the conception of the Drama Panel as indicative of the wider public the BBC was addressing in their programming and Silvey’s own sense of the threat to the cohesion of the panel and to the intelligibility of its response which could come from an instrumentalist rather than the holistic listening Silvey’s research presupposed. The social diversity of the Drama Panel was framed by particular expectations about how its members should be listening.

To further understand the nature and responses of this community of listeners Silvey concluded that ‘there was also a need for background information’ such as ‘facts about the public’s living habits.’²⁰ Subsequently research was broadened to include listening barometers and surveys, alongside reports on listening habits and situations, to produce qualitative information and insight into the home lives of the radio audience. As Siân Nicholas describes “this highlighting of the ‘sociological’ rather than the “statistical” . . . put the BBC Listener Research Section very much in the mainstream of social research in Britain in the late 1930s. The parallels with Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge’s Mass-Observation movement, founded in 1937, are particularly compelling.’²¹ Thus, this research into understanding how radio listening intersected with the everyday being of its audiences aligns with wider currents in the 1930s. But perhaps more importantly, it constitutes a recognition of the fact that the situation of the listener is a key factor in their act of listening. For the BBC’s listener research department the home lives of its panel members was vital to understanding why and how they listened. For Lacey, in the acknowledgment that the ‘situatedness of the embodied listener is important’, lies the recognition that the ‘act of listening opens up a space for intersubjectivity’.²² Thus the homes of the drama panel function as the space wherein the words and sounds of radio drama were encountered, the space where the meanings of those words and sounds entered into a discursive relation. The listening ‘conversation’ is, as Lacey argues, always a potential in the action of listening, but here it is made explicit by the fact that the panel members were required to express their responses to the broadcasts they heard.

Thinking through the home as an intersubjective space in which radio broadcasts in the 1930s and early 1940s were encountered highlights the particular resonances of both the domestic space and the way it and its listeners were gendered. This, in turn, shows how discourses around domestic listening tended to mitigate against a dialogic understanding of the acts of listening. Radio listening is, as Lacey suggests, a ‘technology of the self’ in Foucauldian terms,²³ but it is also a technology of gender: as Teresa De Lauretis points out, gender ‘is the product of various social technologies [...] as well as practices of daily life’, but where De Lauretis proffers cinema as an exemplary ‘social technology’ I would suggest that radio functions similarly, producing a set of gendered effects ‘both as representation and as self-representation’.²⁴ The audience for radio is thus differentially constructed in their listening encounters, with different expectations over the (home)work that is done by

the listening public. It is possible to think of radio as a technology of gender, not least because this media was a form of mass domestic leisure that entered into the home bringing a modernity, conventionally gendered masculine, into the traditionally feminine sphere. But the impact ran both ways, with the domestic (feminine) field informing radio broadcasting, as Maggie Andrews explores in detail in her *Domesticating The Airwaves*: ‘radio [has] not merely entered the domestic space of the home but [has] been structured by that very domestic space’.²⁵ Radio carves out a complex, gendered territory that makes a particular meaning and generates a particular intersubjectivity in the domestic and familiar space. The valence of this territory of meaning (what meanings are created from the radio at home) and domestic territory (what the home front itself means) intensified as the European political situation deteriorated at the end of the 1930s and the idea of ‘home’ accrued greater resonance.

The BBC’s interest in the gendered listener and broadcaster is expressed early on in the *Radio Times* in November 1934 with its special ‘Woman’s Broadcasting’ Number. The foreword by Mary Agnes Hamilton proffers radio as a space free from the gendered preconceptions of other cultural forms because ‘Broadcasting here has the advantage of its youth. It has grown up quite outside the old narrow and narrowing prejudices, and, from the first has seen women as people, on whichever side of the microphone they are placed.’²⁶ Nevertheless, the multiple-page photo-section on ‘some well-known women broadcasters caught at work and at play, with their children, their friends, or their pets, at home and abroad – anywhere but at the microphone,’²⁷ insisted on these broadcasters’ home lives as women rather than their skills on the radio. When it comes to the woman listener, Filton Young, in his regular ‘The World We Listen In’ column, writes of ‘the particular importance of women to broadcasting.’ For Young women ‘are by far the best listeners—the most receptive, the most attentive, the most appreciative, and, in the best sense, the most critical.’²⁸ In investing women listeners with a particular attentiveness as audience, Young does imply an element of activity in their listening: they may be endowed by him with a stereotypical receptivity, but do not remain as the passive vessel for the broadcast message, becoming ‘critical’ and, therein, beginning the interpretative process of public listening.

But in different versions of individual women listeners, a year later, the *Radio Times* pictures discrete listening practices that diverge from Young’s ideal. A ‘Radio

Mechanic' reflecting on his own encounters with 'How They Listen' describes one woman; 'In a small three-room flat near Paddington, the wife of the tenant' who 'told me she kept the set going all day. I asked her what part of the programmes she most enjoyed; she replied, 'I could not tell you; they are all much the same to me; I am by myself here all day and I keep the thing on to keep me from feeling lonely'.²⁹ This lonely housewife exemplifies the 'tap listening' that was anathema to the ethical imperative of the BBC as a public broadcaster, but nevertheless the radio is a central facet of her notion of safety and home. She is distinguished from a 'peculiar type of listener' the Radio Mechanic comes across, who gives a particular attention to emergency broadcasts:

She was an old lady who lived by herself with her housekeeper in a large house in a western suburb; the latter told me that her employer never listened to anything but S O S messages. 'She seems to be expecting to receive a message', said the housekeeper. 'Who from I don't know; but she never listens to anything else.'³⁰

This listener is differently distracted, scanning broadcasts for a hidden message to be revealed, searching the indistinguishable territories of emergency broadcasting for the individual message directed only at her. For this old lady the meanings of radio are very far from public or national.

In general, as a Listener Research Special Report from 1940 indicated, women did not control their household's choice of radio listening: in response to the question "Who usually decides what shall be listened to?" on the radio, half of the young people responding said "Anyone", one-sixth said "Father", another sixth said "Myself", and only 8% said "Mother".³¹ The notion of control over the choice of radio programme and the BBC intention, expressed explicitly by Gielgud, to interpolate a co-operative and attentive audience for radio drama,³² intersects with the gendered dynamics of listening and notion of an active 'public' listener in particular ways. When women listeners were asked to express a preference in an earlier special report more women than men preferred radio drama.³³ But ongoing debates about the ideal attentive listener, especially in the pages of the *Radio Times*, distinguished between the (implicitly female) listener at home and the active, public function of national radio. As Maggie Andrews explains, *Radio Times* correspondents expressed

‘strong condemnation for those who listened indiscriminately to the radio, using it merely as background to other activities. Such listening merely incorporated the “public” sphere of broadcasting into the mundane domestic world without an attempt to delineate its “difference.”’³⁴ An article from 1936 describes how ‘the good listener listens’, pointing out that ‘He does not combine listening with conversation, coughing, sneezing, French knitting and switching over to a different wavelength at half minute intervals. These occupations may well be delightful in themselves but I prefer my listening neat.’³⁵ Though the listener is grammatically gendered masculine, the description (‘French knitting’, ‘delightful’ ‘occupations’) here implies a woman listener at home who does not conform to the ‘neat’ listening habits of the ideal. Such articulations of the attentive listener are fully co-opted into a much wider discourse of Western modernity, what Jonathan Crary identifies as the demand ‘that individuals define themselves in terms of a capacity for “paying attention.”’³⁶ The disciplinary imperatives of modernity mitigate against the distracted listener and her irresponsible inefficiency – her lack of neatness – and presuppose such a listening situation is incompatible with the political, ethical and moral role that BBC broadcast radio intended to play. There is a clear resistance to accepting listening as a ‘plurality’,³⁷ and to envisage a mode of participation in the communicative exchange of radio that allows for variation, difference and distraction at the site of listening.

The anxieties about women and the radio at home are securely bound up with the emerging discourses about listener preferences and the long-standing (Reithian) assumptions that the radio at home, unless attended to with singular concentration, could not produce an active participation in the kind of public sphere that radio could enable, a ‘forum in which self, other and community can be constituted through talk.’³⁸ Different kinds of broadcasts could connect with different kinds of listening – ‘tap listening’ to light entertainment or music would be more acceptable – but as Gielgud’s comments on the audience for radio drama, and debates such as that conducted in the *Radio Times* in August and September 1935 over the abridging of Shakespearean texts for broadcast production, indicate, this genre posed particular questions about ‘the average listener’s desires or abilities.’³⁹ Drama on the radio took many forms but, more than any other spoken voice broadcast, it offered a transcription of a collective audience into a new media technology which, though that audience was now dispersed across the nation, could address them as if they occupied

the same public space. Radio drama also required its listeners to do the work of interpretation, make meaning from the broadcast, and the different forms drama could take – spanning from the media-specific, radiogenic works pioneered by Tyrone Guthrie and Lance Sieveking, to adaptations from existing texts, historical pieces and conventional, naturalist drama – required different levels of exchange with listeners. Radio drama necessarily reconfigures the private, domestic space, as one potentially occupied by a public audience. Radio drama also accrued extra resonance as a site for communal, public meaning as the tensions in Europe escalated into the Second World War. Across the BBC the issue of national identity and security became increasingly important while literature and the arts played a central role in affirming a sense of British fortitude, endurance and cultural identity, through the government funded CEMA (Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts) for example. The role of drama in articulating a patriotic sense of Englishness is perhaps best exemplified in Laurence Olivier's 1944 film adaptation of *Henry V*, but radio had a more consistent and even quotidian role to play. As the actual public spaces for the arts and entertainment were closed at the start of hostilities, radio became more central as a forum for public, artistic expression. But the differences at the site of listening meant that contradictory and unforeseen meanings could be produced that may well have been at odds with the intentions of particular broadcasts or resistant to the communal meanings that were available.

In its early focus on radio drama, BBC Listener Research did expose some particular features of the listening habits and preferences of audiences, and revealed some of the contradictory meanings that were produced from actual contexts, both private and political, of listening. And that women listeners expressed a preference for radio drama over men is, given the issues under discussion here, an interesting historical detail, suggesting they were more willing to do the kinds of listening out that radio drama, over factual broadcasting or reporting, asked for.

Amongst the conclusions drawn by the Listener Research Special Report on the findings from the 1937 Drama Panel of volunteers were, in 'broad outline a picture of listeners' opinions', in which 'the adaptation of modern stage plays' and of 'well-known short stories' were regarded as 'having the highest entertainment value' and 'Classical plays, especially Shakespeare, [were] popular.'⁴⁰ However, the audience response to radiogenic drama was much more ambivalent:

Plays written specifically for the radio – judged by the same entertainment standard – have varied very much in their reception. Philip Wade’s “Wait for Me” is an example of a specifically written radio play which was considered to be very entertaining, while Richard Hughes “We Gave our Grandmother” failed in this respect.⁴¹

Hughes’s ‘We Gave our Grandmother’, an unusual play about an elderly woman’s promise to travel to the moon with an inventor, is described by the *Catholic Herald* as a ‘radio occasion’ but not for positive reasons; it is ‘certainly the most unpleasant play we have heard for a long time.’⁴² The piece goes on to speculate on the extent to which Hughes’s radio drama was intended as a political commentary wherein ‘the title suggests that it was intended as an ironic counterpart to the cry “We gave our Sons” to the Great, or any other, War.’⁴³ ‘We Gave our Grandmother’ posed particular questions, both about the form of radio drama and about wider, contemporary, issues in a crisis-torn Europe, but its listeners were resistant to these questions. Of the forty-seven plays broadcast over the duration of the Listener Research Drama Panel those originating as stage plays were by far the most popular, with two Shakespeare productions the fourth and fifth most popular; dramas written specifically for broadcast and using the particular formal and technical aspects of the radio mode were the least popular. As the *Catholic Herald* put it, in the Drama Panel’s ratings of the plays they had listened to ‘the plays written for the microphone, the real radio plays, came nowhere.’⁴⁴ This suggests that, despite the fact that these dramas were media specific, the attentive Drama Panel listeners struggled with their novelty. Such broadcasts, even when they engaged with the fraught political issues of the day, failed to cohere their audiences into a positive response.

That radiogenic drama did not play an easy role in the circulation of discourse transpiring from the listening situation relates to other key difficulties highlighted by the ‘Drama Reports Scheme’; ‘the necessity for making a play easy to follow’,⁴⁵ and the length of dramas broadcast:

this applies to all forms of dramatic production, there is a real relationship between the length of a production and its entertainment value. The consensus of opinion is that a production which is longer than an hour is at a serious disadvantage. Many find not only that it is difficult to concentrate on

any production, even in the best circumstances, for longer than an hour, but also that external domestic circumstances usually make listening for much more than this time difficult. It is frequently urged, however, that productions such as Shakespeare which could not be compressed into this time, should not be abandoned on this account, but that the play should be broken up by a short interval ⁴⁶

The conclusions of the Drama Reports Scheme expressed here highlight the difference between the ideal, attentive, modern subject and the real listener, who finds concentration difficult ‘even in the best circumstances’. The contextualising and framing by the listener, which defines and produces the act and meaning of listening, circulates through site(s) and conditions of listening. Listening and meaning cannot be extracted from circumstance, and interruptions and other obligations from the ‘external domestic’ realm encroach on and reconfigure the listening situation. As another listener, reported in the *Radio Times* Woman’s Broadcasting number, demonstrates, external domestic circumstances could include location, familial connections and the obligations of employment:

I like [...] a good play, that’s if my husband will keep quiet [...] There was a good play on one evening in September, it was called *The Skin Game*. It came on rather late, and I was visiting relations. We got interested and finally I was sitting with my hat and coat on waiting to go home, but I would wait to hear the end of the play. They pressed me to stay the night, seeing it was getting late, but I had to go to work the next morning, so came home and arrived there somewhere about midnight, -- E.E. ⁴⁷

This particular woman listener ignores all other distractions and obligations to concentrate on her radio listening, a model of the kind of listener Gielgud and others were asking for. But even for her the meanings and experience of listening to the play is situated and circulates through her contexts and sites of listening.

‘E.E.’ may not have been so focused if the broadcast had been an unabridged Shakespearean drama rather than a Galsworthy play, but broadcasts of Shakespeare did gain in popularity. The crisis of war brought more listeners to their national bard – the Listening Barometer of September 15, 1941, shows that the audience for *King*

Lear, broadcast on Sunday 24th August at 3.30pm Home Service was ‘larger than any gained by the other Shakespearean plays in the last three months ... it was also larger than that of any of the competing light music programmes on the Forces wavelength.’⁴⁸ Coupled with this was a policy, developed after the Listener Research Drama Report, to broadcast Shakespeare entire; thus on Monday 2 March, 1942 *Antony and Cleopatra* was aired in full from 8pm onwards, with a twenty minute break at 9pm for a news intermission.

Several attempts were made by the BBC to broadcast drama such as Shakespeare in a form that would enable the audience to listen with the appropriate concentration. With the outbreak of the Second World War patriotism reached a peak and Shakespeare formed part of the notion of home the BBC was broadcasting about and to. Drama on the BBC created a sense of belonging, defining a specific space of security that listeners could listen to and participate in. Three different dramas broadcast in the first years of the Second World War, which fared very differently with their audiences, exemplify how the exigencies of wartime meant particular things for the idea of the nation and the home, and had a particular impact on the listening situation. Exploring their reception by listeners reveals how the meanings and import of these dramas is not only produced through the personal and political contexts of listening, but that it is also unpredictable and connected in oblique ways to the public discourses of the period.

One of the more popular radio dramas of 1941 was a version of George Bernard Shaw’s 1923 play, *St Joan*, broadcast on the Home Service on the evening of Monday September 15, 1941 and featuring Constance Cummings in the part of Joan. This chronicle play presents a series of scenes in the life of Joan of Arc culminating in her trial for heresy and her handing over to the English to be burnt at the stake. Shaw’s ‘Epilogue’, a dream sequence, considers the subsequent recuperation and eventual canonisation of Joan (in 1920), closing with Joan alone reflecting on the imperfections of the world: ‘O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?’⁴⁹ In the BBC report of ‘Outstanding Broadcasts’ of 1941 *Saint Joan* was credited as the star broadcast of the week by 30% of the Listener Research Local Correspondents with the Listening Barometer for the week giving the broadcast 15% of the possible audience.⁵⁰ The popularity of *Saint Joan* was nothing to do with novelty – this was a well-known instance of Shaw’s later dramatic works – and so needs to be articulated to the ways

the play could have been framed by its listeners. Grace Wyndham Goldie, in her regular column in *The Listener*, goes some way towards explaining what she describes as ‘The Greatness of “Saint Joan”,’ arguing that ‘It justified a hundred times the courage of those in the BBC who dared to devote a whole evening to a single play.’⁵¹ For Wyndham Goldie, Shaw’s play is transformed by the wider context in which the broadcast features:

For war and broadcasting turned its known magnificence into something greater, more timeless, more relevant and more desperately necessary than ‘Saint Joan’ ever was in the years of peace within a theatre. Here at last was a play of unquestioned greatness in which war is related to living. And in war we crave for greatness.⁵²

Wyndham Goldie acknowledges that *Saint Joan* is ‘not about war’, but that ‘Joan’s inspiration is connected with war and the expulsion of invaders from France’ means that ‘here we have a play of profound vision with war as part of its vision [. . .] And broadcasting, by stripping away the pageantry of production, the impressive settings and costumes, concentrated our attention upon the play itself and emphasised its quality.’⁵³ The hostilities in Europe and their encroachment onto the British Isles means that Joan’s concerns become those of the everyday listener in 1941, and that this is a radio rather than a stage performance focuses the attention onto such implicit aspects of Shaw’s drama. For Wyndham Goldie with *Saint Joan* came a ‘sense of living greatness which came, at last, from the microphone.’⁵⁴ The popularity of this broadcast arises, therefore, from the intersection of the commonalities of listening – the context of war – with the individualities of the listening situation – the listener at home still vulnerable to German air raids and addressed directly by the rhetoric of Churchill’s wartime speeches.

In contrast to *Saint Joan*, a new sequence of plays written for radio and dealing directly with issues of national identity, valour and redemption, was deemed much less successful by its audience. Clemence Dane’s *The Saviours* comprised seven sixty-minute plays broadcast from November 1940 to November 1941,⁵⁵ offering a national pantheon in these verse dramas that were scheduled to appear on Sundays near or actually on national anniversaries such as Armistice Day. The sequence was clearly intended to bring together the radio audience in a public sharing of national

pride and patriotism. The legend of Arthur is at the heart of *The Saviours* with the figure of Merlin serving as linking narrator in each episode, further emphasising the unity that the plays strive for. The texts themselves are hyper patriotic and make explicit links between English history and the present war against Germany, something Dane made clear in a *Radio Times* preview of the sequence:

it becomes clear that Arthur has in a sense already returned, and will always return, whenever young Britons rise up to fight for the preservation of the people's right, for a purer justice, for a stronger, cleaner land.⁵⁶

Wyndham Goldie, in *The Listener*, identifies the plays as 'occasion-tailored, moral-pointing programmes ... written less because anyone feels impelled to write them than because someone thinks it would do us good to hear them.'⁵⁷ Dane evokes the 'people' in her presentation of her plays, but Goldie resists the 'us', and the moral imperative behind the interpellation of an 'us', highlighting the reductive appeal to context ('occasion-tailored') the broadcasts made. Goldie does describe the plays as 'notable', 'fresh' and 'suited [to] the microphone', but the attempt at 'bringing the Arthur story up to date in details scattered here and there' such as 'consistently and emphatically describ[ing] Arthur's enemies ... as Germans rather than as Saxons' results in 'a totally false impression.'⁵⁸ Gielgud's assessment was that the sequence was 'uneven', though considering the third and seventh plays (*England's Darling* and *The Unknown Soldier*) 'outstanding amongst broadcast plays.'⁵⁹ The listeners, however, concurred with Goldie's critical reception of *The Saviours*.

An insight into the reception of the plays is given in the Listening Barometer figures issued on May 28, 1941 which show that only 3.8% of the potential audience listened to the fifth play in the sequence, *The Light of Britain*, in contrast to other Sunday afternoon plays such as 'The Taming of the Shrew' 11.2%, 'A Woman of No Importance' 12.6%, and 'An Enemy of the People' 9.4%.⁶⁰ As the report concludes, the average audience for *The Saviours* sequence so far was 3.54% of the potential audience, while the average for other plays broadcast on Sunday afternoons was 7.5%.⁶¹ Thus, despite its direct appeal to a British audience in wartime and use of cherished national icons such as King Alfred, Robin Hood, and Admiral Nelson, *The Saviours* garnered a lower audience than Shakespeare, Wilde, or Ibsen and disappointed its listeners. The instrumental attempt to appeal to and attempt to create

a listening public with its jingoistic sentiment failed to resonate with the individualities of the listeners at home.

In contrast to *The Saviours* a twelve-part radio drama sequence, seemingly far removed from contemporary anxieties, became the most sensational radio drama of 1941, sensational for its reception rather than actual content. The first in Dorothy L. Sayers's sequence of forty-five minute plays dramatising the life of Christ, *The Man Born To Be King: Kings in Judea* was broadcast on the Home Service in the Sunday Children's Hour slot on December 21. The press conference, which had been held eleven days earlier to announce the Sayers's plays, had instigated widespread newspaper coverage with the *Daily Mail* scandalising its readers with the headline 'BBC "Life of Christ" Play in U.S. Slang'. Sayers was explicit in her intention to 'realistically and historically' depict the life of Christ in *The Man Born to Be King*,⁶² and argued that the creation of something 'vivid and human' required a 'modern English' of 'flesh-and-blood people'.⁶³ But her listeners remained to be convinced of the appropriateness of the language of her radio plays and of her attempt to depict the Son of God in broadcast form. By January 6, 1941 the BBC had received 3,457 letters about *The Man Born to Be King* of which 3,085 were letters of criticism. A range of religious organisations lodged complaints with the BBC (including the Synod of Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Protestant Truth Society, the Free Church of Scotland, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland, and the United Protestant council) with the most vociferous objections coming from the Lord's Day Observance Society who called for the BBC to 'refrain from staging on the wireless this revolting imitation of the voice of our Divine Saviour and Redeemer.'⁶⁴

For Sayers, and for James W. Welch, BBC Director of Religious Broadcasting who suggested the project, *The Man Born to Be King* was an opportunity to revivify Christian faith in Britain's time of crisis, and for Sayers particularly there was ample scope to explore the contemporary resonances of Christ's life and times. Sayers explained in a letter, for example, that 'the complicated political position of Judea under the Roman Empire ... is so very much like that of a tributary state to-day, under the British Empire, or in some cases under the Reich'.⁶⁵ As letters to the BBC illustrate, for the listeners the controversy around Sayers's plays was a personal and political issue, one related to the experience of war, to their families and to their homes. A Mr H. Thompson felt called to 'connect the surrender of Hong Kong (the first part of our Empire to fall) with this degrading effort to drag out Lord down to the

level of an Englishman, and a modern one at that!’⁶⁶ Correspondence from ‘three horrified mothers’ in Weymouth and Leigh on Sea termed the proposed broadcast ‘absolute blasphemy’ expressing their belief that ‘Britain will continue to suffer if this suggested broadcast is allowed to go through’, and concluding that ‘as ordinary English mothers we protest most strongly & will not allow our children to listen to such iniquitous teaching.’⁶⁷ In contrast Colonel Sir Cusack Walton, writing from Leamington Spa, notes his ‘household’s’ appreciation of the first play’⁶⁸ while Miss Edith Miller, at the British Consulate in Lisbon, explained that ‘it is not often I get as interested in anything as I have done in these plays.’⁶⁹ Colonel Walton does demonstrate his anxiety over a potentially careless audience for *The Man Born to Be King* citing ‘the objection, which applies equally to broadcast services, of the wireless being left on carelessly in homes or public houses to become merely a background to careless talk’, but he sees even here the possibility for redemption writing that ‘even then some stray words may yet lead to the conversion of the thoughtless or the sinner.’⁷⁰ Correspondence like this reveals the extent to which listeners, and those who decidedly refused to listen, were deeply affected by Sayers’s radio dramas, framing and contextualising the plays through their own sites and circumstance of listening.

The impact of *The Man Born to Be King* is also apparent in the Listening Barometer reports which indicate that it won over much of the audience with ‘14.3 % of the adult population listen[ing] to the third in the series’ *A Certain Nobleman* broadcast on the Home Service on Sunday ‘a very high figure for Children’s Hour and would be an exceptionally high figure for any Sunday afternoon play.’⁷¹ When the full sequence had been broadcast 300 Local Correspondents were questioned by Listener Research and ‘more than half’ acknowledged that they ‘would welcome a repetition’ a percentage which included ‘30% of those who had originally disliked the project and 40% of those who had no strong feeling about it.’⁷² Indeed Sayers play sequence were rebroadcast on key Sundays from December 24, 1942 to Lent 1943 and then on consecutive nights during Holy Week 1943 and became a staple of BBC religious broadcasting; they were broadcast again in a new production during Holy Week 1944, 1945 and 1946 and a new recording of the full sequence in 1948-9, with another one in 1951-2. The persistence and success of *The Man Born to Be King* demonstrates how much of the meaning of radio drama derives from the listening situation at its sites of reception, from Sussex to Lisbon, in the family home or in a public house,

heard by mothers or colonels, Sayers's controversial plays were connected up by listeners to a network of events and affects and eventually circulated back to become a hegemonic articulation of British cultural identity.

Particularly in the lead up to and during the Second World War BBC radio drama was a significant vehicle for notions of patriotism, and cultural and national identity. But as the different receptions of *Saint Joan* and *The Saviours* indicates, it was at the site of listening that the meanings and value of these plays were generated. The ongoing debates about types of listener, the difference of gender, and the concern for attention and imagination in the listener all highlight the constructed nature of 'listening' itself. Listening is not a capacity that pre-exists, it is inextricable from and formulated through a network of social, political and technological relations. And, as the different listeners to BBC drama exemplify, listening is not a passive tuning in, but an active being in the world which can create social and political significance and generate particular meanings for the site of listening, where, for example, the home (the private domestic space of listening) can be articulated in particular ways to the homeland threatened by the forces of war. The words and sounds of broadcast drama, therefore, do not work in any predictable way and their meanings circulate through the variable private and political circumstances of listening, and the contingent intersections of communal and individual frames of reference. Even the many correspondents to the BBC who chose not to listen out for *The Man Born to Be King* constitute part of the listening audience for this radio drama event and contribute to its connotations. What emerges is an understanding of the radio event as an assemblage of machines, bodies and locations, in which both listeners and non-listeners participate in the public meanings of the radio broadcast, where unsettled conditions can generate unexpected significance, and where home is a territory that listening itself denotes.

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- ¹ Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p.97.
- ² Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p.174.
- ³ Ibid., p.176.
- ⁴ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: cultural origins of sound reproduction* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p.343.
- ⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Listening', *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Art, Music and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 248.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 247.
- ⁷ John Tebbutt, 'The Object of Listening', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23:4 (August 2009), pp.549-559
- ⁸ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, p.184.
- ⁹ Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, p.82-83ff.
- ¹⁰ The dramatic control panel was not reintroduced after the war; its place was finally taken by the studio mixer (using mostly local sounds from one studio and various effects sources).
- ¹¹ Val Gielgud, Memorandum on Features and Drama, November 21, 1939, quoted in Asa Briggs, *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Volume 3 The War of the Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.114.
- ¹² D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.273-4.
- ¹³ Val Gielgud, *British Radio Drama*, p.87, 84.
- ¹⁴ For Reith's attitude to listener research, see Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, [1965] 1995), pp.247-50.
- ¹⁵ Silvey notes the concerns that the 'Reithian Sunday policy' caused working class listeners in particular to tune to continental radio stations for dance music and 'that the overwhelming majority of letters came from middle-class writers' (Robert Silvey, *Who's Listening? The Story of BBC Audience Research*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1974, p.15, p.28)
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.19.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p.59.
- ¹⁸ BBC Listener Research Report (hereafter abbreviated to LR) number 56, 'Drama Reports Scheme', 1937, BBC Written Archives R9/9/1, p.320.
- ¹⁹ Silvey, *Who's Listening?* p.59.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p.60.
- ²¹ Siân Nicholas, 'The good servant: the origins and development of BBC Listener Research 1936-50', *Introduction to BBC Audience Research Reports Collection, Part I: BBC Listener Research Department 1937-1950* (Microform Academic Publishers, 2006), p.6.
- ²² Lacey, *Listening Publics*, p.179.
- ²³ Ibid., p.178.
- ²⁴ Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.2.
- ²⁵ Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.242.
- ²⁶ *Radio Times*, 16 November 1934, p.533.

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- ²⁷ *Radio Times*, 16 November 1934, p.537.
- ²⁸ *Radio Times*, 16 November 1934, p.546.
- ²⁹ *Radio Times*, 8 November 1935, p.15
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ LR/164, 'Adolescent Listening And School Broadcasts', September 1940, BBC Written Archives R9/9/4, p.3; 719 school pupils aged 14-17 in seven different towns were interviewed.
- ³² Writing in the *Radio Times* in August 1935, a special Radio Drama issue, Gielgud pleads the 'listening audience' for 'co-operation' and for 'the same amount of attention and concentration as its members would be willing to give to any other form of dramatic entertainment.' 'Where Radio Drama Stands Today', *Radio Times*, August 30, 1935, p.10.
- ³³ LR/71, 'What Listeners Like,' May 1939, BBC Written Archives, R9/9/3; it was reported here that plays were liked by 65% of men and 73% of women, one of three instances (others were serial plays and serial readings) where women gave programmes more votes than men (p.2).
- ³⁴ Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves*, p.24.
- ³⁵ *Radio Times*, 10 January 1936, p.11.
- ³⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge Mass, & London: MIT Press, 2001), p.1.
- ³⁷ Lacey, *Listening Publics*, p.177.
- ³⁸ Sarah Wilson, 'Gertrude Stein and the Radio', *Modernism/modernity* vol. 11 no.2 (2004), p.262.
- ³⁹ Val Gielgud letter, *Radio Times*, September 6, 1935, p.9. Gielgud was responding to Herbert Farjeon's polemical piece 'Must Shakespeare be Butchered by the BBC?', *Radio Times*, 30 August 1935, p.13.
- ⁴⁰ LR/56 'Drama Reports Scheme', August 1937, BBC Written Archives R9/9/1, p.326.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² *Catholic Herald*, May 14, 1937, p.10.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ *Catholic Herald*, August 20, 1937, p.10
- ⁴⁵ LR/56 'Drama Reports Scheme', August 1937, BBC Written Archives, R9/9/1, p.327.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p.238.
- ⁴⁷ This listener is one of 'Seven representative "unknown" women who give their views' in the 'The "Daily Woman" Speaks' feature, *Radio Times*, November 16, 1934, p.543.
- ⁴⁸ LR/54 'Listener Research Weekly Reports' no. 51, September 1, 1941, BBC Written Archives 9/1/1.
- ⁴⁹ George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan* (Harlow: Longman, 1983), p.166.
- ⁵⁰ LR/388 'Outstanding Broadcasts' October 22, 1941, BBC Written Archives 9/9/5,
- ⁵¹ Grace Wyndham Goldie, 'The Greatness of "Saint Joan"', *The Listener*, September 25, 1941, vol. 26 no.663, p.280.
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ *The Saviours* comprised *Merlin* (broadcast on the Home Service on November 24, 1940), *The Hope of Britain* (HS November 29, 1941), *England's Darling* (HS

February 2, 1941), *The May King* (HS March 7, 1941), *The Light of Britain* (HS May 4, 1941), *Remember Nelson* (HS October 19, 1941), *The Unknown Soldier* (November 11, 1941).

⁵⁶ Clemence Dane, 'The Man Who Saved Our Land', *Radio Times*, November 22, 1940, p.5.

⁵⁷ Grace Wyndham Goldie, 'Broadcast Drama', *The Listener*, January 2, 1941 vol 25, no.625, p.28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Gielgud, *British Radio Drama*, p.100.

⁶⁰ LR/52 'Listener Research Weekly Reports' no. 36, May 28, 1941, BBC Written Archives 9/1/1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction' in *The Man Born To Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1943), 17.

⁶³ [Dorothy L. Sayers] 'B.B.C. Announcement: The Man Born to Be King', December 10, 1941, BBC Written Archives, R1 publicity: Sayers, Dorothy L. File 1B 1942-3, p.2.

⁶⁴ BBC Written Archive, Broadcasting Press Cuttings Programmes; Features, Variety, Drama Man Born To Be King, From 01/01/1941 to 21/12/1942, Book 3, Box 2 P183/3.

⁶⁵ Sayers to D McCulloch, October 11, 1940, in BBC Written Archives Sayers, Dorothy L: Children's Hour, File I, 1940, R1/910.

⁶⁶ Letter from Mr H. Thompson, January 5, 1942, in BBC Written Archives, P.C.S Man Born to Be King L- Z 1941-1946, R41/250/2

⁶⁷ Letter dated December 11, 1941, in BBC Written Archives, P.C.S Man Born to Be King A- K 1941-1946, R41/250/1.

⁶⁸ Letter from Colonel Sir Cusack Walton, December 31, 1941, in BBC Written Archives, P.C.S Man Born to Be King L- Z 1941-1946, R41/250/2.

⁶⁹ Letter from Edith Miller, April 13, 1942, in BBC Written Archives, P.C.S Man Born to Be King L- Z 1941-1946, R41/250/2.

⁷⁰ In BBC Written Archives, P.C.S Man Born to Be King L- Z 1941-1946, R41/250/2.

⁷¹ LR/52 'Listener Research Weekly Reports' no. 75, February 28, 1942, BBC Written Archives 9/1/1.

⁷² LR/52 'Listener Research Weekly Reports' no. 111, November 7, 1942, BBC Written Archives 9/1/1.