

# Silence and Communication in Shakespeare's Dramatic Works<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** Silence is in this article looked at as a formal element which obtains its meaning within communication processes. This meaning has to be ascertained by the recipient in a creative process. General observations on the history of silence in literature are followed by a theoretical discussion, which starts with the definition of silence as a meaningful suspension of speech and distinguishes various forms of silence. A distinction between silence and stillness makes it necessary to include manifestations of silence in modern authors like Samuel Beckett. Textual analysis is opened by examining a special rhetorical figure, silence as a break within a sentence (*aposiopesis*), in *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the central part of the essay silence is investigated as a significant component within the thematic concerns of several plays, for instance the relation between silence and death in *Hamlet*, the villain's silence in *Othello* and female silence in *Measure for Measure*. With regard to the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* and the tragedy *Titus Andronicus* two different forms of silencing a person by force are treated, kissing and mutilation. With its new orientation on form and communication this article goes beyond Harvey Rovine's standard study on silence in Shakespeare (1987).

**Key words** Silence; stillness; sign; zero-signifier; pause; form; communication; aposiopesis; iconicity.

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1 This article grew out of a joint iconicity-oriented project I was involved in with Michal Ephratt from the University of Haifa. Although our common work yielded many intellectual pleasures and insights, our approaches turned out to be ultimately incompatible. All passages which are indebted to Michal Ephratt's expertise are identified scrupulously. — The text of this contribution was read and discussed in the research group of Dirk Vanderbeke at the University of Jena. I owe deep gratitude for many hints and suggestions.

universities of Mainz, Manchester, and Leicester. He taught as Professor at the universities of Mainz, Leicester and Jena. Book-length publications include *Rilke's, Neue Gedichte*“ (1971), *The Lyric Self* (1979), *The Political Speech in Shakespeare* (1979), *Theory of Style* (1981), *English and Scottish Balladry* (1983), *Dialogue und Conversational Culture in the Renaissance* (2004), *Edition of Shakespeare's Hamlet* (2005), *Don Quixote's Intermedial Afterlives* (2010) and *Genre in Shakespeare* (2015). He published articles on rhetoric in Renaissance literature, the tradition of Don Quixote in English literature, narratology, intertextuality, iconicity, the letter as a genre, ethics in literature and detective fiction.

### General Observations on Silence in Literature

Silence has always been an essential element of drama, a genre which, one would think, lives to great extent on speech and dialogue. In fact, the very beginning of the European tradition of drama coincides with a remarkable prominence of silence (Vogt 2001). In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* Cassandra falls silent, to the surprise of the chorus, as she perceives Agamemnon, who has just come home from the Trojan war, stepping on the red cloth. Conscious of all the bloody deeds that occurred in Agamemnon's house and full of foreboding of the crimes to come, she is overcome by speechlessness, which after about 300 lines gives way to inarticulate cries that are later followed by meaningful speech. Silence is here a sign of sorrow which transcends all that can be expressed in words. In another of Aeschylus's tragedies, which is, however, not extant, Niobe silently mourns the loss of her children for three whole days.<sup>1</sup> About two and a half thousand years after Aeschylus silence turns out to be as important as ever in the works of Samuel Beckett, both as a theme as well as a formal element. He incorporates blanks and pauses in his works, for instance in *Waiting for Godot*, which interplay as equals with words (Weagel 2002). In his plays the meaning of silence cannot easily be identified as the result or equivalence of emotional occurrences occasioned by extreme sorrow, fear, protest, terror or beauty, but silences appear rather as signs of disorientation. The meaning of silence is often found in these modern plays in the inexplicability of a world emptied of meaning and in the loss of direction and motivation. It would be

<sup>1</sup> To refer to another prominent example from classical antiquity, there are many significant moments or phases of silence in Homer, for instance immediately at the beginning of the *Iliad*, the priest Chryses walks silently along the shore after Agamemnon refused to release his cherished daughter Chryseis, or there is Achilles' silent grief for the death of his dearest friend Patroclus. In Homer there is even a formula referring to silence that is repeated 15 times: "They all fell silent. They sat there speechless." I owe gratitude to Arbogast Schmitt from the University of Marburg for drawing my attention to these passages.

an important project to investigate the development of the use and significance of silence in drama which led to the extreme position of Samuel Beckett.<sup>1</sup> The fact that silence emerges as a sign of a general loss of meaning in Beckett is not an isolated phenomenon. Analogously, as an author John Cage, who was also a writer, says in the visualized form of his *Lecture on Nothing* (printed in *Incontri Musicali*, August 1959), in which silences are indicated by visual spaces<sup>2</sup>

*I have nothing to say*  
*and I am saying it* *and that is*  
*poetry* *as I need it*

The empty spaces between these words and phrases are “iconic” for silence, in that they both resemble and function as absences. The constant interruption of the text by empty spaces and the concomitant irregular arrangement of the words visualize, in the written form of the “Lecture,” loss and renunciation of meaning.

A distinction which ought to be made, especially when dealing with silence in modern works, is the differentiation between silence and stillness. John Cage’s notorious *4,33*, in which a pianist sits for more than four minutes before his instrument without once touching the keys, is an experiment in stillness rather than silence.<sup>3</sup> A problem here is the lack of terminological clarity. The word silence can

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1 In such a history Scandinavian literature would play an important role. To mention a significant example, there is an innovative novella, written towards the end of the nineteenth century, which represents a love relation between a man and a woman who do not once talk to let alone touch each other, Ola Hansson, *Sensitiva amorosa* (1887). I owe this reference to Knut Brynhildsvoll from the University of Oslo. An important aspect of Ibsen’s art is the dramatist’s frequent silence on the inner life and motivations of his characters, for instance in *Hedda Gabler*, which is designed to initiate a thinking process in the audience. As far as the theme of silence is concerned, Ingmar Berman’s film *The Silence* (1963) represents an extreme point in this Scandinavian tradition. For general studies on silence see, for instance, Dannenhauer 1980, Hart Nibbrig 1981, Luhmann/Fuchs 1989, Plett 2004, 430-431.

2 Cage, 2012, 109. The present arrangement of the text passage follows the first printed version *Incontri Musicali*, August 1959. There have also been theatrical productions of *Lecture on Nothing*, for instance by Robert Wilson, premiered on August 22, 2012 at the Ruhrtriennale Festival, Jahrhunderthalle, Bochum.

3 See, for instance, Gann, Kyle, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage’s 4’33”*, Icons of America. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

mean many things. It is a kind of cover term which usually includes stillness.<sup>1</sup> Yet in my present research context it may be useful to look at silence as a sort of blank or absence within a spoken or written environment. It is part of the communication of two or more participants, which is not the case when we speak of the silence of the sea or when the word has a symbolic meaning as in the silence of the lambs. Like silence as stillness, wider concepts of silence such as silence as “the supreme form of wisdom” (Vanderbeke 65) or silence as “the general consecration of the universe” (Melville 204)<sup>2</sup> are external to verbal interaction; they have no actual communicative relevance, although they may be of deep significance. Stillness can, of course, be commented on as is the case at the beginning of *Hamlet*, where not a mouse is stirring, as one of the guards says.

Referring to the problem of silence and stillness in modern texts, a note on a very short work by Samuel Beckett set in a stage context, “Breath” (written form published in *Gambit* 4.16, 1969), may be appropriate. It includes silence, breathing-in and breathing-out accompanied by corresponding light effects, and isolated cries (vagitus). Silence is here part of an acoustic, respiratory, and visual event, which suggests, but does not specify meaning.

#### Curtain

1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds.
2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and slow increase of light together reaching maximum together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold about five seconds.
3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together reaching minimum together (light as in 1) in about ten seconds and immediately cry as before. Silence and hold about five seconds.

#### Curtain

Analogous to the extreme shortness of the text, its action is strongly limited, reduced to two faint cries, a birth-cry (vagitus) at the beginning and a death-cry at the end and the actions of breathing in and out, accompanied by light effects. It is a drama in miniature with rising and falling action. After each of the three “scenes” — the initial focus on rubbish lying flat on the stage and inspiration and expiration

1 A characteristic title of an article is Lipov, Anatoly. “4’33” as the Play of Silent Presence. Stillness, or Anarchy of Silence?” *Culture and Art*, 2015, numbers 4 and 6. Part 1, 436-454.

2 This is quoted in Vanderbeke 2011, 67.

— a “silence” is held five seconds. There is no communication represented on the stage, but because of the constellation of cries and silences this seems to be, other than Cage’s 4,33, a real instance of the aesthetic use of silence and not stillness. The work presents itself as a pointed instance of Beckett’s reductionism. Particularly, the actions of crying and breathing are dissociated from a human context, since they are the result of amplified recording. Correspondingly, the five-second phases of silence are the result of stage machinery. The whole is a reductive treatment of human existence, focussing on elementary reactions like crying and breathing and emphasizing meaninglessness by the use of silences and rubbish as the only stage properties. The silences mark beginning and end as nothingness. However, it is necessary to emphasize once more that Beckett’s short play presents silence dissociated from human communication on stage. As far as the relation between silence and stillness is concerned, a brief reference to one of Maurice Maeterlinck’s symbolist plays may be useful. In *L’Intruse* (“The Intruder”) (1890) there is stillness in that a baby does not cry for weeks after birth and the nightingales do not sing for the time being. The mother is shut off from her family silent in a room. Yet there is communication and silence as part of communication among the rest of the family. So here we are half-way between the traditional representation of silence as part of communication and silence as stillness.

Looking from the use of silence/stillness in modern works back to Shakespeare’s plays, a huge historical distance opens, which makes us see the Elizabethan dramatist in perspective. Anticipating our findings, we can say that representations of stillness are rare in Shakespeare and that silence is practically in all its instances part of communication and gains its effectiveness in its deviation from and opposition to dialogue. Also it is to be noticed that Shakespeare’s use of silence is in a strong way embedded in the tradition of rhetoric, which had been aware of the expressiveness and persuasiveness of silence. Although in Shakespeare’s plays silence is by far not as experimental as in some of its modern varieties, where it assumes a powerful epistemological and psychological presence, it is still an extremely important aspect of his art which needs attention. In fact, it will be shown that in his use of silence Shakespeare reveals his supreme craftsmanship as much as in other aspects of his art which have received more attention. The present article starts approaching silence in Shakespeare’s plays from a rhetorical and formal perspective,<sup>1</sup> but constantly includes a discussion of its communicative context. The rhetorical approach begins by looking at silence

1 What Luckyi (2001) says, namely that “the notion of silence as a powerful rhetoric in itself [...] can be traced back to classical sources”, holds true for Shakespeare, too.

as a consequence of syntactic breaks, which suspend the end of an utterance, a figure called *aposiopesis* in rhetoric. Then the meaning of selected instances of silence will be determined by examining their grammatical and metrical features and their integration in the plays' communicative processes. Moments of silence tend to occur at crucial places in the plays' development of the plot and in the representation of characters. One of the significant aspects derives from the question that if a character speaks or falls silent in a critical situation is frequently a matter of personal decision which can have profound ethical implications. Moreover, a character's silence may stimulate the recipient to ask for his or her motivations and thus proceed to essential questions raised in the play. With its new orientation this article hopes to supplement Harvey Rovine's (1987) standard study on silence in Shakespeare.

### Some Theoretical Aspects

Before going into Shakespeare, it is necessary to make a few theoretical points. Silence is part of language.<sup>1</sup> It is not a mere renunciation of speech, but it has a meaning, or, as linguists say, in a somewhat problematic definition, it is a zero-signifier carrying meaning (e.g. Ephratt 2011).<sup>2</sup> Since within its context silence carries meaning, one may be tempted to call it a motivated sign (Fischer/Nänny 2001). However, the peculiarity of silence as a sign is that it has no concrete verbal body to which its meaning is attached, so that an iconic approach to silence is problematic if not bound to failure. If all instances of silence are semiotically alike, if they all have the same sign-structure — i.e. zero — silence as a sign is tautological. The fact that silence is or can be meaningful, does not derive from its nature as a sign, but from contextual features. Aspects to be considered in the process of identifying the meaning of silence are the possibly self-declared motivation of the silent person, the interlocutors' or witnesses' attempt to account for the silence, and the integration of the silence in the dialogue. The present

1 It is not "beyond the language" (Jäkel 2004).

2 "Zero signifier" is a useful concept, if no phonetic signal occurs, but one is expected, for instance in morphological paradigms. This is the case, for example in German/Nominative Singular "der Mann-0" versus Genitive/Singular "[des] Mann-es." The question is if silence can be correlated to phenomena like Jakobson's "zero phoneme" or to the phenomenon of 'zero derivation' in English word-formation. A distinction has to be made between "the presence of nothing" and "the absence of something." Whether we can speak of silence as a kind of "presence of nothing" is doubtful (as distinct from the "absence of something" occurring in morphology). For a wide-ranging article on the phenomenon of zero signifiers see Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994.

contribution emphasizes the role of silence in communication. In a communicative context silence can, as is known from real-life discourse, have a powerful effect and emerges in a great number of varieties. Silence is most conspicuous in dialogue, when an interlocutor fails to make an expected utterance. We must be aware that silence interacts with speech in many ways and reveals a much greater semantic potential than well-known expressions such as “pregnant pause” or “eloquent silence” suggest. Perhaps it is the very fact that silence is a blank space or “zero position” in a text that is responsible for its openness to interpretation. As far as literature is concerned, silence as the absence of expected speech is particularly effective in drama, which usually brings characters on stage, who are involved in verbal exchange. In this genre silence stands out as a deviation from a norm, for we go to the theatre not only to watch a spectacle but also to hear actors talking to one another (in dialogue) or to themselves (in soliloquy).

A classification of different forms of silence cannot be provided here. But it is useful to draw a basic distinction between voluntary (intentional) silences and involuntary (unintentional) silences. Voluntary silences serve many functions. They are the result of the decision to dispense with an expected utterance in a communication situation. A case of involuntary or unintentional silence may be speechlessness caused by emotional stress, for instance when a person is so shocked in a situation that words fail him/her. Another cause of involuntary silence may be the loss of the capacity for speech due to illness or death. A special variety of involuntary silence is forced silence, which may be the result of coercion<sup>1</sup> or threat or physical harassment, the latter occurring for instance, when a person is gagged or has the tongue cut out. For the latter cases of forced silence there are instances in Shakespeare, which will be discussed. Even though there may be borderline cases such as the silence of a speaker who is interrupted and forced into the role of the listener, a phenomenon occurring in quarrel scenes in drama, just as in real-life dialogue. That a typology of different forms of silence does not really help in the case of Shakespeare derives from the fact that the varieties of silence are innumerable and of protean shape. To illustrate this phenomenon an example from *King Lear* is adduced which defies classification. It involves a significant occurrence of silence in dialogue, when there are two or more interlocutors and only one takes the floor to make a decisive pronouncement. Thus at the very end of Shakespeare’s

1 Coercion can also occur in dialogue. A question may, for instance, be put in such a way that a desired answer is prompted or provoked. See Aaron Fogel, *Coercion to Speak: Conrad’s Poetics of Dialogue*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985. I owe this reference to Christian Wehmeier, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena.

*King Lear* there are three candidates for an authoritative utterance (Albany, Kent, Edgar) and only one makes it. Interestingly, two versions of the play (Quarto, Folio) allocate the crucial utterance to different characters, producing entirely different closures of the play with differing implications concerning the future of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Since we are dealing with drama, which is designed to be performed on stage, it is necessary to consider the relation between silence defined as absence of speech and the physical representation of silence on stage. Also a distinction can be made between silence as pure absence of speech and body language performed silently.<sup>2</sup> An interesting instance of the combination of silence accompanied by physical action is the moment when in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* (II.4) Queen Katherine silently walks about the court to the King and kneels down before him and only then starts speaking. Silent body language is here an impressive action of female assertion in a male-dominated context. A more complex example is when Hamlet holds Ophelia by the wrist and, with the other hand over his brow, peruses her face for a long time and after waving his head three times raises a deep sigh. When leaving her, he still looks at her without speaking a word.<sup>3</sup> The present contribution concentrates on the written text, though we are aware that stage directions have to be taken into account and that body language, for instance facial expressions and gestures and the relative positions of the interlocutors in space, may add meaning to silence. It is obvious that much gets lost in the transition from performance to text, just as much may be retrieved in the passage from text to performance.<sup>4</sup>

1 The issue at the play's end is the distribution of political power among those left in charge of the kingdom after the tragic events that have happened in Lear's and Gloucester's families. If the last utterance is assigned to Edgar, as in the Folio Edition, there is an outlook for a stable and responsible government within the bounds of the country. If the play's concluding words are spoken by Albany, as in the Quarto Edition, a wider, intercontinental political vision would be envisaged. Philip McGuire (1985: 89-121) devotes a chapter of more than thirty pages to this problem in a fascinating analysis of the two endings of *King Lear* which is, however, concerned preponderantly with speech attribution and only indirectly with silence.

2 Ephratt (2011, 2016) makes a doubtful distinction between verbal silences (the choice of the speaker to express content by a null verbal signifier) and non-verbal silences.

3 Silence accompanied by physical communication is in this mediated by Ophelia in a narrative. Norbert Greiner places this scene in the cultural tradition of the harlequin.

4 As readers of play texts, we are often unaware of the potential impact of a character's silence, because it does not appear before us on the printed page in the same way the words of the speaking characters do (Rovine, 1987, 2).



Silence is in this article looked at as a formal element which has a meaning within communication processes. This meaning is motivated and has to be ascertained by the recipient in a creative process. I will begin with silence as a break within a sentence (*aposiopesis*) in plays such as *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. After terminological reflections concerning the distinction between silence and pause I will turn to silence as a significant component within the thematic context of a number of plays. In *Hamlet* the relation between silence and death is discussed, in *Othello* the villain's silence and in *Measure for Measure* female silence. With regard to the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* and the tragedy *Titus Andronicus* two very different forms of silencing a person by force are treated, in jocular way by kissing and in a violent way by mutilation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Aposiopesis**

Aposiopesis is a rhetorical figure signifying a disruption of discourse by omitting the expected end of a clause or sentence.<sup>2</sup> The discontinuation of a syntactic unit may be used as a rhetorical device prompting the hearer or reader to complete the statement. A good example illustrating and at the same time explaining the way the figure works is to be found in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Brutus receives exhortative anonymous letters which are meant to make him join the republican conspiracy against Caesar. One of these letters contains the following statement: "Shall Rome, et cetera?" (*Julius Caesar*, II.1.151) The incomplete sentence has the desired effect. Brutus completes it: "Thus must I piece it out: / Shall Rome stand under one man's awe?" (II.1.51-52) A more emotionally charged instance of aposiopesis is represented in Cleopatra's dying statement in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which the Egyptian Queen's death is formally expressed by the breakup of the sentence, "What should I stay —," which is completed by her attendant lady Charmian, "In this vile world?" (V.2.304). An additional iconic aspect of aposiopesis is in this case the breakup of the line — iambic pentameter — after two stresses, so that metrically room is given for the queen's dying. The breakup of the sentence and the breakup of the line coincide:

What should I stay —  
Dies. (V.2.312).

The fact that Charmian completes Cleopatra's statement with the words "In this vile

1 All Shakespeare quotations are taken from the Norton Edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 1997.

2 See Sloane 2001, 28.

world?" iconically stresses the friendship of the two women, which is a positive ethical value within disaster. They share the same line and the same sentence. One can only marvel at Shakespeare's artistry in packing so much meaning into this moment. For the actresses it is a challenge to do justice to Shakespeare's rhetorical and metrical realization of this dying moment. A culmination of Shakespeare's art of aposiopesis occurs just in the scene which represents Cleopatra's simulated suicide. Here it is the eunuch Mardian who reports to Antony that Cleopatra's last words were "Antony, most noble Antony!" (IV.15.30) and that in her dying groan the name Antony was broken into two. This is an instance of aposiopesis reduced to a single word. Mardian describes that in this one-word aposiopesis Antony's name "was divided / Between her heart and lips" (IV.15.32-33). What he means is, that only half of the word was spoken by the lips and the other half remained in her heart."<sup>1</sup> That this enormous display of rhetorical power has the strongest effect on Antony and finally drives him into suicide is thus made dramatically credible. As an example of the strongly expressive character aposiopesis may assume, a part of the last scene of *King Lear* can be adduced. A Gentleman enters with a bloody knife in his hand, saying, "It came even from the heart of — O, she's dead!" (V.3.198). The Gentleman breaks off, unable to finish the sentence after the preposition "of" and to refer to the person concerned. After the interruption, which is marked by a dash, he starts a new sentence,<sup>2</sup> thus verbalizing the silence. An interesting textual problem occurs at this point. The just-quoted line is taken from the Folio Edition. In the Quarto Edition the Gentleman's utterance breaks off after "heart of" (V.2.19), so that the aposiopesis stands more clearly per se.

### **Terminological Excursus: Silence, Aposiopesis, and Pause**

As was said above, aposiopesis is a rhetorical figure signifying the breakup of an utterance before its end. The silence involved in aposiopesis is usually short-timed. It is a figure of speech in that it is motivated and in that the hearer is expected to supply the omitted part of the utterance. However, it is a fact to be observed particularly in oral discourse that not all breaks before the end of an utterance imply meaningful silence. An example from Ian McEwan, *Nutshell* (2016) is a reference to cats: "'Cats can be a bloody nuisance,' Claude says with an air of helpfulness. 'Sharpening their claws on the furniture. But.'"<sup>3</sup> The adversative conjunction "but" is not followed by an antithetical utterance, as the narrator explains: "He [Claude]

1 See John Wilders' 1995 edition, 256.

2 Another iconic device is the use of the exophoric pronoun "she" which refers to Cordelia.

3 Ian McEwan, *Nutshell* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016) 50.

has nothing antithetical to add.” In the present case the break obviously derives from the incapacity of the speaker to continue the clause begun by him. Such breaks are actually an element of the character’s idiolect occurring all through the novel. In another instance from the same work the breaking off of clauses seems to be the result of real or pretended feeling. A woman, who has lost (actually murdered) her husband, a poet, is asked to join a commemorative poetry reading. The request is pervaded by so many syntactic disruptions that meaningful silences do not occur: “I’m so, so sorry. If you or. Could say a few. But we’d understand. If you. If you couldn’t. How hard it” (137). The term aposiopesis, which implies meaningful ellipsis, can hardly be applied to such an incoherent way of talking. Linguistically oriented research has found out that such instances of “gaps and holes and silence” are more characteristic of oral than written speech.<sup>1</sup> “Omissions, evasions, or uncomfortable silences” (ibid.), as found in Joyce and McEwan, have hardly anything in common with the rhetorical figure of aposiopesis and the term should be avoided with respect to them. Our comparative glance at modern texts has made it clear how deeply Shakespeare is embedded in the classical rhetorical tradition and how much his language is removed from authentic oral discourse.

Another terminological problem arising in this context is the relation between silence as a shorter or longer omission of expected speech in a communicative situation and a pause as a deferral or postponement of an intended statement. It is true that the speaker or interlocutor is silent during the time-span of the pause, but he or she does not refuse to make an utterance. The statement is only postponed for a time. At this point it may be useful to comment on a pause in Antony’s funeral oration in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, which has erroneously been referred to as an example of aposiopesis in rhetorical handbooks (Sloane 2001, 29). The orator pretends to pause in order to get his emotions under control again.<sup>2</sup> It is his intention to make the pause appear motivated emotionally — it may possibly be motivated, one never knows in Antony’s rhetoric — so that it assumes a similarity to aposiopesis. The intended effect of this pause is enhanced by a boldly realized instance of metonymy. The speaker maintains that his heart is Caesar’s coffin and that he has to wait for it to come back again:

Bear with me.

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1 Dirk Vanderbeke, Volker Gast and Christian Wehmeier, “Of Gaps and and Holes and Silence: Some Remarks on Elliptic Speech and Pseudo-Orality in James Joyce’s Short Story ‘The Sisters,’” *International Journal of Literary Linguistics* 6, No 1, Art 5 (2017):1-15.

2 See Stroh 2001.

My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,  
And I must pause till it come back to me. (*Julius Caesar*, III.2.102-104)

The speaker's pause has a dramatic function in that it is filled by a conversation of the hearers on stage, who comment on Antony's speech in statements such as "Methinks there is much reason in his sayings" (*logos*), "Poor soul, his eyes are red as fire with weeping" (*pathos*), and "There's not a nobler man in Rome" (*ethos*). Antony's continuation of his speech is also referred to by one of the plebeians: "Now mark him, he begins again to speak" (III.2.14). This pause has not only a multiple effect on the hearers, as their comments indicate, it is also an explorative pause in that it is used by the speaker to test the effect of his words. It is a moment of silence on the part of the orator, which does not miss its effect on the audience during the performance, but it is by no means an instance of aposiopesis.

### **Silence and Death: "The Rest is Silence"**

Most of the instances of aposiopesis analyzed above have shown that there is a particular relation between death and silence in Shakespeare. Silence as a signifier is characterized by the absence of sound. The living human subject changes upon its death into an inanimate object that is specifically characterized by a permanent absence of speech.<sup>1</sup> Breathing one's last frequently coincides with speaking one's last words. By death a person loses living capacities. Especially the capacity to talk, which is one of the unique features of humankind, is demolished. That is the reason why a person's final articulated words, his or her dying words, are accorded so much significance, for instance Jesus' "Seven Last Words on the Cross." Another example would be Goethe's "More light" ("Mehr Licht") or Caesar's "Et tu, Brute." Even prisoners are sometimes permitted to make a "gallows speech" before their execution. In drama, which is sustained by speech and verbal exchange, the loss of speech is a significant concomitant of death. Silence is accentuated in moments of dying from the Greek tragedies to Shakespeare's plays. We have seen that in Cleopatra's last utterance dying and loss of speech coincide conspicuously. Analogously at the end of Antony's dying speech breathing his last breath and the loss of the ability to speak go together: "Now my spirit is going; / I can no more" (IV.16.60-61). Leaving out the verbal signifier "speak" in "I can no more" is iconic to the content: dying is concomitant with Antony's lack of speech.

Another impressive instance of dying going together with loss of speech is the poetic description of Ophelia's death by drowning, when she is pulled "from her

1 For this passage I am indebted to Michal Ephratt.

melodious lay / To muddy death” (*Hamlet*, IV.7.153-154). Ophelia’s transition from life to death or from song to silence is iconically marked by enjambment: a mismatch between the language (syntactic clause and semantic content) and the text’s metric layout. The text slides typographically across different lines.

Hamlet’s dying words, “The rest is silence” (V.2.300), signify that for him speech has come to an end and that there is nothing to expect but silence, while in his “to-be-or-not-to-be” soliloquy he had still said that “in that sleep of death what dreams may come” (III.1.68). In their absoluteness, Hamlet’s last words imply that there is nothing to follow but silence, which excludes anything coming up internally or externally. He denies a beyond, a transcendent world in which there is room for speech or sound.<sup>1</sup> In order to recognize the ethical dimension of Hamlet’s last utterance, we have to look at the context of his words. At the most extreme moment, when the poison is running in his body, he settles the succession in the Danish state by nominating Fortinbras as the future king. Fulfilling his responsibility for Denmark, whose dynasty has been extinguished by the play’s tragic events, he reveals his moral status.

From a Christian position, Hamlet’s last words — “The rest is silence” — are to be recognized as an agnostic stance, which is, however, countered in Horatio’s subsequent apotheosis,

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. (V.2.30-303)

The absoluteness of Hamlet’s retreat into silence is put into perspective by the prospect of a transcendent world as reflected in Horatio’s apotheosis. Horatio’s lines are a moving obituary on Hamlet. A “noble heart” is assigned to him and a term of endearment (“sweet prince”) addressed to him and he is imaginatively lifted to heaven, accompanied by the song of angels, an absolute contrast to silence.

### **The Villain’s Silence in *Othello***

In Act V, Scene 2 of *Othello* the protagonist, the black general of the Venetian navy, has to go through a terrible anagnorisis, as he learns that his subordinate, “honest Iago,” has deceived him perfidiously and manipulated him to kill his innocent wife Desdemona. Asked by Othello why he “thus ensnared my soul and body” (V.2. 309), Iago makes his last utterance in the play:

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<sup>1</sup> As Watson (1994, 97) says, for him [Hamlet] there is “no longer on any prospect of a judgment beyond”.

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.

From this time forth I never will speak word. (V.2. 309-310)

Iago rejects the question, fobs Othello off with a curt tautological remark (“What you know, you know”) and retreats into silence. This refusal to explain his deeds has been called “one of the darkest moments in *Othello*” (Vanderbeke 68). The problem now arises what the meaning of Iago’s silence is. It is not simply the speechlessness sometimes observed in criminals that have been caught out.<sup>1</sup> The villain’s brusque denial to answer Othello’s question, reveals Iago’s callousness, yet Othello’s unanswered question leads us to what is perhaps the most decisive of the play’s problems, the issue of motivation. Coleridge had spoken of “the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity” (Coleridge, vol.2 315). This comment implies that Iago’s crimes are a manifestation of pure evil, which does not need motives, such as revenge for being passed over for promotion.<sup>2</sup> His denial of speech ties in with Shakespeare’s conception of Iago as a character, who never in the whole play makes an utterance which is not on in a way or other related to his evil intentions. He is the incarnation of negativity, which is expressed in his earlier self-definition, in which he defines himself as “I am not what I am” (I.1.65), a devilish antithesis to Yahwe’s self-definition as “I am that I am” (*The Bible*, Exodus 3: 14). Thus his final retreat into silence is a manifestation of inhumanness — an absolute absence of speech and humanity — of a character who has entirely lived on his obsession to destroy persons who are free of evil, Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio. Iago’s silence is not only the extreme opposite of the wisdom of silence, which has been praised in classical antiquity and in various religions, but also is a silence that acts in the world of the recipients. Beyond the ethical nullification of the villain pointed out above, leaving Othello’s question unanswered Iago’s silence serves as a speech act activating the drama’s readers and audience (Austin 1962). The silence causes the passive observers watching the play to attempt, in a kind of turn-taking, to fill in

1 The ethical (and later on legal right) of the suspected to avoid self-incrimination.

2 We cannot here go into a detailed discussion of the motivation issue. I would only like to point out that depth psychology can be overemphasized. From the point of view of modern psychology and psychiatry it is known that a humiliation such as neglect of promotion to the advantage of a competitor may rankle in a person and have disastrous consequences. See Haller, 2015. Racial hatred is an additional motive for Iago, who in his temptation of Othello maliciously plays on the latter’s sense of racial inferiority. It is always surprising how much Shakespeare knew about spiritual abysses in humans.

the “pregnant” answer.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Equivocal Nature of Isabella’s Silence in *Measure for Measure***

Female silence is a much-discussed topic in Shakespearean research.<sup>2</sup> This article cannot attempt to make a general contribution to this topic let alone participate substantially in feminist studies of Shakespeare. Following is a discussion of Isabella’s silence at the end of *Measure for Measure*. As it will be shown, Isabella’s silence is equivocal not only in being self-chosen and simultaneously determined by the Duke’s domineering personality, but also when considered as part of a relation between representatives of different genders. Isabella has proved to be a very eloquent pleader during the play, but when, at the end, she receives the Duke’s marriage proposal, she does not answer nor respond in any other way, at least as far as the text tells us.<sup>3</sup> This silence can be interpreted as a silent protest to Duke Vincentio’s masking his identity in the play, and keeping the truth away from Isabella about the fate of her brother Claudio and being, on the whole, a rather dominant and even manipulative character, which shows even in his proposing to Isabella. How to deal with Isabella’s silence is to a great extent a matter of the production of the play. But one grammatical fact is quite important. When proposing marriage to Isabella, the Duke expressly asks her to answer him or, rather to fulfill his request, as the grammatical form of the imperative indicates — “Give me your hand and say you will be mine” (V.1. 490). Yet Vincentio immediately proceeds to other matters, which excludes the possibility for Isabella to answer. At the play’s very end he once more says:

Dear Isabella,  
I have a motion much imports your good,  
Whereto, if you’ll a willing ear incline,  
What’s mine is yours, and what yours is mine. (V.1.531-534)

One would think, these two utterances expect a reaction from the woman, but the Duke does not leave her room for an answer, because his speech is at this point, as

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1 For this idea I am indebted to Michal Ephratt.

2 The standard monograph on silence in Shakespeare is Rovine 1987. Studies concentrating on silent women are, for instance, McGuire 1985, Luckyi 2002, Spar 2010.

3 This kind of speechlessness has been addressed with the term “open silence”, coined by McGuire 1985, to describe a silence which may be interpreted in different ways, especially in theatrical performance.

more often in the play, dominantly monologic. In the last quotation, an imminent communication of the two seems to be envisioned, but hardly a real dialogue, because the Duke only wishes her to lend a “willing ear” to his words. Thus there are two aspects to Isabella’s silence. First, it is a clear pragmatic fact that she refrains from answering and thus from explicitly complying. Her silence defines her as other than the submissively compliant woman.<sup>1</sup> Second, her silence can also be interpreted, at least to some extent, as the result of the commanding attitude of the Duke, which does not allow for real dialogue, or, to put it another way, her voice is not really expected to be heard even in such an important decision as marriage. Isabella’s silence seems in this intricate case to be self-chosen and simultaneously determined by the Duke’s domineering personality, albeit not by force. What we witness here, is an extraordinary ambiguity of the meaning of silence, which represents a challenge to reader, actor, and director. Shakespeare’s treatment of silence at the play’s closure casts a shadow on the ending of a play, whose status as a comedy is anyway extremely doubtful. Isabella’s taciturnity is more ambiguous than Cordelia’s silence in *King Lear*.<sup>2</sup> When requested by her father to express their love for him, the two elder daughters make a big show of love in exaggerated flattery, while Cordelia explicitly denies using any rhetoric, which results in her losing her share in the inheritance of the kingdom. The denial to answer a question or to provide an expected comment to an offer or request is in Shakespeare always a sign which challenges the reader or spectator to find out the meaning.

### **Forced Silence I: Kissing in *Much Ado About Nothing***

The idea of enforcing silence in a comic context by stopping a mouth with a kiss comes up twice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the first instance Claudio makes a speech on “Silence” as “the perfectest herald of joy” (II.1.267), yet his love declaration to Hero is rather verbose, even though it emphasizes the unique expressiveness of silence. Hero, who belongs to the silent women in Shakespeare, does not give an answer, whereupon Beatrice, who is one of the most eloquent female characters in Shakespeare’s plays, advises her to speak or, if she cannot do so, to “stop his [Claudio’s] mouth with a kiss” (II.1.271-272). The apparent contrast between verbose Claudio and reticent Hero calls for further comment. Claudio’s praise of silence, which goes together with a love-declaration, is one of the most

1 “[Isabella’s] silence has to be evaluated as more than a meaningful reply.” Lichterfeld 2015: 306. Transl. W.G.M.

2 Cordelia’s silence is actually verbalized silence, a demonstrative act which she defends with much eloquence.



frequently quoted passages from Shakespeare,

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy; I were but little happy I could say as much. Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give myself away for you, and dote upon the exchange.

There is a contradiction between Claudio's panegyric words on silence and his alleged claim that his happiness would be little if he could express it in words. There seems to be a false ring in his words, just as the context is dubious, since it is Don Pedro who had arranged the love relationship and had immediately before wooed and won Hero for Claudio during a masked ball. It is quite clear that these do not belong to the great lovers in Shakespeare's plays. This impression is enhanced by the role Hero plays in the scene. She does not speak a word in this love-related context. In the whole long scene, in which she and Claudio's love is a central topic, she has only two modest lines. As a lover she, just as her groom, has simply not enough personal substance to be convincing. So it is dramatically logical that later she becomes the victim of an intrigue and is publicly humiliated and cast out during the wedding ceremony in church by Claudio, who not once comes to doubt the calumny against his bride. She does in no way represent the contemporary ideal of the silent woman, an ideal which finds expression at the time in an allegorical term like "Lady Silence" and in Coriolanus' praise of his wife Virgilia "as my gracious silence" (II.1.161).<sup>1</sup> To attribute this ideal to Shakespeare, the author, would anyway be preposterous, because he brought so many witty and eloquent women on stage, which make his comedies what they are, above all Beatrice (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Rosalind (*As You Like It*) and Viola (*Twelfth Night*). With their continuous comic word-fencing, the second couple of lovers in *Much Ado About Nothing* represent a counterpart to Hero and Claudio. This is also made clear, when towards the end of the play the topic of kissing comes up again. Beatrice will not stop her witty bantering, so that her lover Benedick, kisses her, saying, "Peace! I will stop

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<sup>1</sup> See Wolfgang G. Müller, "Das Problem weiblicher Identität bei Shakespeare," *Die Frau in der Renaissance*. Ed. Paul Gerhard Schmidt (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994): 223-241.

your mouth.” (V.4.96)<sup>1</sup>

### Forced Silence II: The Use of Violence in *Titus Andronicus*

The motif of silencing a person by gagging her/him with a kiss also emerges in the most violent example of forced silence in Shakespeare, Lavinia's abuse in *Titus Andronicus*, which is part of the play's overall revenge plot. When Lavinia sees herself threatened by rape by Tamora's two sons, her passionate protest is interrupted by Chiron:

LAVINIA

No grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature,  
The blot and enemy to our general name,  
Confusion fall —

CHIRON

Nay then, I'll stop your mouth. (II.3.182-184) [*Grabs her; covering her mouth.*]

These are Lavinia's final words in the play. It is significant that putting her to silence is the result of verbal and physical aggression, the kiss here being an act of violence, a preliminary of the rape that is to follow. The iconicity of the passage is metrically enhanced by the fact that the violent interruption of her speech coincides with enjambment, the break of the line, which is indicated by Jonathan Bate's arrangement of the half-lines which has been adopted, together with the stage direction, in the above quotation.<sup>2</sup> Already before their infamous deed the two rapists had planned to mutilate their victim, so that she cannot betray their names. They cut out her tongue to prevent speech and they cut off her hands to prevent writing. In Shakespeare's source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the victim, Philomela, succeeds in making known the crime and its perpetrators by sewing an embroidery.

1 In contradiction to most editions, the editor of the Third Aden Edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* (London etc.: Bloomsbury, 2009), Claire McEachern, assigns this speech to Leonato, because this reading “also provides for a more egalitarian accommodation between the lovers which seems in keeping with the tenor of their relationship throughout (316). This is an example of a feminist position asserting itself in an editorial detail. It is noteworthy in this context that, as we have shown, it is a woman, Beatrice, who earlier on advises Hero to “stop his [Claudius'] mouth with a kiss” (II.1.270-271). Thus the idea of using a kiss to quieten a lover's flood of words is not alien to both sexes in this play. This is another kind of egalitarianism between the sexes than the one envisioned by the editor of the latest Arden edition of the play.

2 See Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*. Ed. Bate. 1995, 179, footnote 184.

The additional precaution, taken by the assailants in Shakespeare's play, the cutting off of Lavinia's arms,<sup>1</sup> fails, since she succeeds in writing the names of the rapists in the dirt, using a staff she holds with her mouth and between the stumps of her arms.

After the loss of her capacity for speech Lavinia wanders about in the play as a silent woman, and in the play there is a search for a language of signs that enables her to communicate what happened to her. All this is semiotically highly significant, but we concentrate on a "dialogue" between the two rapists and their mutilated victim:

DEMETRIUS

So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,  
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON

Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,  
And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.

DEMETRIUS

See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.

CHIRON

Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS

She hath no tongue to call nor hands to wash,  
And so let's leave her to her silent walks. (II.4.1-8)

Lavinia is cynically demanded to do — speak and write — what she cannot do as a consequence of her mutilation at the hands of the two victimizers. The passage represents a perversion of dialogue in that Lavinia is addressed with imperatives without being able to respond. Such a one-sided dialogue, i.e. a dialogue between two addressers and an addressee, who has been robbed of the power of speech, is a transgression of the rules of communication, just as the whole situation is a transgression of moral law. The mutilation of the dialogue form corresponds to the mutilation of the victim of violence, which is an extreme instance of iconicity. The whole passage harps on the semiotic aspects of a terrible crime

1 Shakespeare's characters know Ovid's story. Marcus Andronicus refers to the story of Philomela, noting that "she but lost her tongue", while Lavinia found a "craftier Tereus" who "cut these pretty fingers off, / That could have better sewed than Philomel" (II.3. 41-44). Lavinia, mutilated, runs around with the book of "Ovid's *Metamorphosis*" (IV.1. 42), and her father wants to read to her "the tragic tale of Philomel", treating of "Tereus' treason and his rape" (IV. 47-48).

## Conclusion

The very fact that as a sign silence has no concrete verbal body and is still motivated and meaningful, is the reason for its enormous semantic and expressive potential, which is unfolded in communicative contexts. An occurrence of silence in a text is a challenge to understand or establish its meaning. While Shakespeare, other than a modern writer like Beckett, does not make silence an overall theme and formal element of his works, he places instances of silence at crucial moments in his plays and makes them constitutive elements of dialogue and characterization and of the play's ideational substance. Silence, which presents itself as an epistemological enigma in dramatists such as Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard and David Mamet, is in Shakespeare's works an inexhaustible source of meaning to be retrieved by the recipient. It is a paradox that silence as non-speech can have a stupendous communicative power.

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