

Olivia R. Barry
SAA 2026 | Silence on the Stage
Abstract

Disabled Communication and the “Mute Letter” in *Epicoene*

This essay considers how early modern theorization of the “mute letter” informs our understanding of sound, silence, and communication in Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene*. As a type of letter that was framed in early modern grammatical and orthographical texts as having “no sound” without the “help” of a vowel, descriptions of the “mute letter” both mimic the ableist vocabularies used to describe disabled people in the period as well as reflect a collaborative and assistive early modern idea of communication and sound. By reading “muteness” not only as an absence of sound but an expansive grammatical framework, I consider how the oral/gestural communication method used by Morose and his servant, who himself is called Mute, functions as a generative and subversive disability language. While taking into account the coercive dimensions of their relationship, this essay situates Morose and Mute’s communication method within an early modern history of disability. Doing so reveals how Morose and Mute’s exchanges upend early modern communication hierarchies that privilege the oral over the gestural, and casts disability as foundational to the grammatical, typographical, and embodied forms of communication in the play.

Zeidy Zady Canalea Violante

More than a thousand words: *Silencio*, an adaptation of *Othello*, as an interrogation of embodiment, disability, violence, and power

The Mexican theatrical company Los Colochos Teatro, founded in 2010, quickly gained recognition for its distinctive approach to Shakespearean tragedy. The company has become known for its creative adaptive approach that transforms Shakespeare's plays into theatrical events engaging directly with contemporary Mexican society. My paper examines *Silencio*, an adaptation of *Othello* traversed by the topics of disability and domestic violence, to explore how it interrogates structures of power and violence both in its source material and within the sociopolitical context of twenty-first-century Mexico.

Through an approach informed by theories of performativity and body studies (particularly Blackman's (2021) concept of the "somatically felt body"), the paper will argue that *Silencio* creates a space for audiences to experience embodiment as a complex dynamic phenomenon. The adaptation invites spectators to consider how the somatic realities of Deaf individuals challenge reductive understandings of corporeality and unsettle normative assumptions about communication and presence. A central focus of my analysis is the tension between different forms of silence in the production. These include the apparent silence of Deaf people whose communicative possibilities are constrained in ableist environments; silence as a tool of power and coercion; and the broader social silence that accompanies encounters with gendered and ableist violence.

In conclusion, this paper will argue that the adaptation's performative strategies (its use of sign language, sound design, stage design, and choreography) generate a somatic experience that problematizes the audience's approach to violence inflicted on women and disabled bodies. Within this constellation of theatrical practices, silence becomes a potent language of its own, one that articulates a forceful critique of discrimination, enforced muteness, and societal complicity.

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The Still Shrew: Katherine's Silent Last Act in *The Taming of the Shrew*

The criticism of the silence of specific dramatic figures in Shakespeare's comedies focuses mainly, not surprisingly, on Isabella in Act 5 of *Measure for Measure* with Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew* holding a respectable second position. This paper looks at the other, more talkative sister's surprising oral and behavioral silences at the end of *Shrew*. It examines these silences in relation to Katherine's emotions about her marital and social status in the play alongside wives' emotions about their marital and social status as documented in representative late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century cases on the grounds of marital cruelty from the London Consistory Court. Concentrating on the emotions concerning marital and social status of fictive and real wives provides localized literary and legal contexts that both strengthen our understanding and complicate our interpretations of marriage in the play and in early modern London.

Pierre Hecker
Carleton College

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“Thoughts be free, and need pay no toll.”

or

Did Someone Remember to Mirandize Iago!?

Standing accused of crimes, Shakespeare’s characters regularly make what in a modern context would appear to be a tactical retreat into silence. Are these cases of Ciceronian *cum tacent clamant* (“when they remain silent, they cry out”)? Starting with an exploration of the legal background of a nascent right to silence in Elizabethan England, the paper examines the numerous characters who choose, often in a legal context, to exercise this right. Focusing in particular on Iago’s final silence as being consistent with his belief system all along, the essay considers the political implications of our complicity in wanting to pluck out the heart of Iago’s mystery.

'Hold thy peace': Lacking Silence in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*

Abstract: Francis Beaumont's 1607 comedy, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, is a loud play. It is also a play deeply concerned with silence. Words serve as a disruptive force and as a means of action, both informing and destabilizing the embedded plot of *The London Merchant* and the overarching plot of *Pestle* itself. The play is full of interruptions: the Citizen, his Wife, and the 'actors' of the *London Merchant* plot are constantly trying to verbally overpower each other, and versions of the phrases "hold thy peace" or "hold thy tongue" appear fifteen times throughout the play. For Beaumont, noise and chaos are used for comedic effect, while silence is always just out of reach — indeed, even when Rafe dies, he cannot stop talking, saying, "oh, oh, oh, etc." (5.335). *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, then, allows us to interrogate the importance early modern playwrights placed on silence on stage, and its representational role in comedies of the time. I argue that silence in this text is used to telegraph a kind of inaction to the audience; while silence affords opportunities for stillness to an actor in performance, silence and stillness in this play run counter to the lives of common people. This paper will explore the role that silence, and the boisterous lack thereof, play in constructing embodied action.

Laura Kolb

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Trickery and Silence in *The Winter's Tale*

At the end of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes, a statue comes to life, in a scene that *must* be a trick, but *feels* like a miracle. This paper explores how Shakespeare uses silences in this scene and throughout the play to produce this contradictory theatrical effect: a scene that invites an emotional response—wonder, amazement—that is at odds with many spectators' and readers' rational reaction: a retroactive puzzling-out of just how Paulina and Hermione pulled this off. It situates the final scene alongside other final scenes—*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Measure for Measure*—where Shakespeare produces comic closure by (1) having several characters engage in a highly theatrical trick designed to heal rifts and restore social unity and (2) by having key female characters stay (audibly) silent. *The Winter's Tale* both continues this career-long pattern and deviates from it. By falling silent about trickery, *The Winter's Tale* draws our attention away from theatrical techniques toward their emotional effects. By retaining the figure of the silent woman at the center of the trick, the play suggests that the resulting collective wonder—an affect in which the reader or theater audience often participates—is as coercive as it is seductive.

Erin Minear
William & Mary
SAA 2026: Silence on Stage
Abstract

Working Title: "Forgiveness and Silence"

Near the conclusion of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine extends unconditional forgiveness to his best friend Proteus for getting him banished and for attempting to sexually assault his betrothed. Silvia, the betrothed in question, though previously outspoken in her rejection of Proteus and her declarations of love for Valentine, says not a word for the rest of the play. No one apologizes to her, and she forgives no one. This awkward juxtaposition of forgiveness and silence appears repeatedly at key moments in Shakespeare's career.

Throughout his work, Shakespeare shows an intense preoccupation with the topic of forgiveness, a preoccupation that becomes most evident in the generically hybrid plays to which he devoted the last years of his professional life. Through the first half of the twentieth century, the critical consensus—with a few dissenting voices—would have it that Shakespeare's career closed in a serene twilight, with the playwright embracing reconciliation and expressing an understanding and acceptance of human flaws. More recent critics have found Shakespeare's late plays less harmonious, gentle, and forgiving. I am interested not so much in whether we should read these endings as reconciliatory, but in the ethical questions raised by the plays' treatment of forgiveness. Who is expected to forgive, and what work is required of them? Is forgiveness always the moral choice? In *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, Paulina and Prospero stage grand scenes of forgiveness, complete with the music that invites characters and audience to perceive a figurative as well as literal restoration of harmony. And yet, in both cases, there is a silence at the center, where we expect to find forgiveness either extended or accepted. My paper will explore this unsettling silence and its significance.