Feminine Sprezzatura and Strategies of Silence in Early Modern Drama

Abstract:
This essay considers purposeful silence as a mode of feminine sprezzatura that produces action. The woman who refuses speech establishes a seemingly passive role that actually provokes response in her audience. In this essay I consider the strategies of silence used by Isabella in Marlowe’s Edward the Second, the Duchess in Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi, and Cordelia in Shakespeare’s King Lear. Isabella’s obvious effort in persuading Edward to her desires is ultimately replaced by her more discreet and effective use of the whisper to prompt Mortimer Jr. to action. The Duchess of Malfi takes advantage of her “speaking look” that tells her observers what they want to hear. Cordelia’s insistence that the sound of love is silence establishes a desire to extract speech from her that spans the play. Each woman resists the demands for her speech in order to accomplish more than they could with rhetoric, no matter how skilled. Ultimately, however, their active silence is transformed into enforced silence, suggesting that the anxiety produced by women’s silence is as much of a concern for early modern society as that produced by women’s speech.

I begin with a definition of sprezzatura that emphasizes the efficacy that hides behind the nonchalance of the pose, building on two of the categories Harry Berger puts forth in The Absence of Grace: the sprezzatura of suspicion (or defensive irony) and cosmetic sprezzatura.¹ I consider in this paper the particular strategies and outcomes of women performing sprezzatura, a performance that prompts action in others as well as allowing the women to establish modes of self-representation. These female characters accomplish action they desire by withholding speech and making silence an artful position. Their silence makes things happen and in doing so, they double the disguise of sprezzatura, concealing their effort within a purposeful pose of passivity.

I consider one case from Shakespeare and two from his contemporaries at either end of his career: Lear’s Cordelia (1605-06), Queen Isabella from Marlowe’s Edward the Second (1592-93), and the title figure from Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1613-14). Each woman uses silence as a rhetorical

technique that displaces her own desire and intention onto her audience, making her audience responsible for acting on those desires. Considering these female characters as cases of effective feminine sprezzatura requires a move from the formal courtly competition seen in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier in order to think more broadly about feminine social performance and accomplishment. I am also building on Berger’s investigation of representational anxiety in courtiers. Berger argues that Castiglione and Giovanni della Casa’s Galateo both present gynephobia prompted in a number of different sources of feminine threat, including “the fear of having one’s status reduced or usurped by women” and the fear of being “sexually unmanned by women’s insatiability, infidelity, and promiscuity.” The traditional linking of women’s speech and women’s sexual availability inform my reading of silence as an active, artful mode of self-representation.

Queen Isabella, the best-spoken woman in Christopher Marlowe’s Edward the Second, has a complicated relationship with speech and silence. Early in the play, when she is still attempting to persuade Edward to abandon his favorite, Gaveston, and return his affection to her, she frames her attempts as “speaking fair.” The idea of speaking fair is, in the period, itself complicated. Fair speech is, on the one hand, a method of expressing due deference and courtesy. On the other hand, dictionaries and phrasebooks of the period highlight the propensity for deception to motivate fair speech. Nicholas Udall’s 1581 collection of useful phrases from the works of Terence explicitly identifies the contradictory meaning of the phrase:

Bona verba quaeso, Speake fayre I pray you or prouerbially, you wil not do as you say. For those wordes bee alwayes of the wryters vsed and spoken Ironicè, that is to say, in mockage or derision … he might say it elegantly and properly in Latin Bona

2 Berger, 72, italics his.
The seemingly straightforward value of “fair” is subject to the same suspicion in visual representations as in verbal ones. Castiglione, using the voice of the Count, explains that physical grace in the courtier is paralleled by beauty in a lady:

How much more then doeth a man delite in one, I meane not foule, that is manyfestye scene she hath nothinge uppon her face, though she be not so white nor so red, but with her naturall colour somewhat wan, sometime with blusshinge or through other chaunce dyed with a pure rednes, with her hear by happe out of order and ruffled, and with her simple and naturall gestures, without shewing her self to bestow diligence or study, to make her faire? This is that not regarded pureness which best pleaseth the eyes and mindes of men, that stande alwayes in awe to be deceived by art.\(^3\)

“Diligence or study” may make a woman faire, but that effort can’t help but show itself. It is the “not-regarded” (sprezzata or “careless” in Charles Singleton’s translation) quality of her “pureness” that attracts positive attention. That final clause makes explicit the anxiety about deceit that is always contained within discussions of women’s beauty. Does it still count as purity if she has to work for it?

The effort Isabella puts into her pursuit of Edward certainly produces further alienation on his part. Lamenting Edward’s rejection of her, Isabella complains that “These hands are tired with haling of my lord / From Gaveston, from wicked Gaveston— / And all in vain, for when I speak

\(^3\) Nicholas Udall, *Flouvres or eloquent phrases of the Latine speach*, (London: Thomas Marshe, 1581).

him fair, / He turns away and smiles upon his minion” (2.4.26-29). “Haling” is glossed here as “dragging” (n.26), which explains why her hands are tired, but there’s also an echo of “hailing” of “greeting” or “calling.” In this sense, “speaking fair” is another method of trying to attract attention, which the syntax of the sentence establishes a parallel between Isabella’s speech and Edward’s expression, implying that as Isabella speaks fair to Edward, Edward smiles fair to Gaveston. Isabella labors in vain to gain the favor that Edward grants Gaveston.

Having failed to produce her desired outcome through fair speech, Isabella constructs an alternate means of accomplishing her goals. Her maneuvering to reinstate Gaveston after his second banishment is accomplished through the whisper, as when she persuades Mortimer Jr. in a conversation conducted apart from both the other lords and the play’s audience. Isabella’s whispers, as unintelligible to the audience as they are to the other characters, suggest a way in which that the play’s irony is itself ironized, since she offers no words at all behind which other words can hide. She evades the common mistrust of the well-spoken woman not by speaking more plain and more true but by refusing to make her speech public. The opposite of irony and deception here is not sincerity, but unintelligibility.

Isabella constructs narrative in which she is not constructing a narrative, but is instead at the mercy of others’ accounts. She places the onus for speech onto Mortimer Jr., asking, “Be thou my advocate unto these peers” (1.4.212). She withholds public speech, drawing Mortimer Jr. away from both the lords onstage and the play’s audience, insisting that “none shall hear it but ourselves” (229). The content of the whispered conversation between the queen and Mortimer Jr. is not available as speech, but the visual display cannot be hidden and is much remarked upon. Earlier, Isabella had

5 All citations are from the Revels edition, edited by Charles R. Forker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
hoped to persuade the king with visual rather than verbal evidence, asking him to “Witness the tears that Isabella sheds, / Witness this heart, that sighing for you breaks” (1.4.164-65). This approach was clearly unsuccessful, perhaps because her effort was too visible. Here, her interaction with Mortimer Jr. is narrated by members of their onstage audience who are reading her sincerity rather than her labor:

WARWICK. Do but mark how earnestly she pleads.

LANCASTER. And see how coldly his looks make denial.

WARWICK. She smiles! Now for my life, his mind is changed.

(233-35)

Once the whispering pair returns to the main group and Mortimer Jr. begins his own persuasion, Isabella only speaks to promote Mortimer Jr.’s own words—“Yet, good my lord, hear what he can allege” (250)—and in doing so foregrounds his agency rather than her own part in the project. Then she recedes from the discursive scene and is silent for forty-five lines while Mortimer Jr. steps forward.

A visual metaphor for sprezzatura is the elegant swan gliding across the water while its legs paddle furiously beneath, and Isabella is paddling like mad. But her calm exterior disguises both her ultimate goal—prompting Mortimer Jr. to arrange the murder of her husband—and the rhetorical and emotional effort that makes that goal happen. Isabella is defensive in her use of silence, and she deploys her silence in such a way that she becomes visibly distant from the effects she produces. This switch to defense happens only after the visible work of speaking fair and hailing Edward are unsuccessful.

While Isabella's sprezzatura of silence is situational, Webster's Duchess of Malfi uses her verbal reticence as an ongoing political mode. There is something of the Machiavel in how the
Duchess pays lip service to the demands of her brothers in order to maintain personal and political autonomy in her own domain. Her selective silence withholds information while suggesting compliance. From her first entrance, it is remarked that her observers “wish, in wonder, / She held it less vainglory to talk much / Than you penance, to hear her” (I.ii.192-94). Her self-representation relies as much on this quietness as it does on her physical appearance, which itself is given a voice by her observers: “in that look / There speaketh so divine a continence, / As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope” (198-200). This is the persistent mode of the Duchess's social interactions and it is a variety of Berger's cosmetic sprezzatura, in which “sprezzatura is to be worn as a velvet glove that exhibits the contours of he handiness it conceals,” but may also (and here Berger quotes Frank Whigham) “camouflage vulnerability.”

At least part of the vulnerability that the Duchess needs to camouflage is how circumscribed she is by her familial relationships. She has no personal name within the play and her final statement of self is a declaration of her title: “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (IV.ii.141). Her name is a dramatic enhancement of the title used for the female counterpart of Castiglione's courtier: “The preposition in 'donna di palazzo' adds a strong genitive force of property to its topical sense: the lady is part of and belongs to the 'palazzo,' which is both a political institution and its architectural embodiment, and therefore she belongs in it and gets her meaning from it. The term thus glances at the particular sociopolitical and economic parameters behind the production of a new gender position.” The song recited by her murderer, Bosola, to bring her “by degrees to mortification” ironically emphasizes the

---

8 Berger, 88. Hoby translates “donna di palazzo” as “Gentilwoman of the Palaice.”
Duchess's connection to her land: “Much you had of land and rent, / Your length in clay's now competent” (176, 181-82).

As much as her property identifies her self, the Duchess’s very body is claimed in the play by her brothers, especially Ferdinand. His rage is provoked by more than just her disobedience. He believes that she has betrayed his own blood: “Damn her! that body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, call’d a soul” (IV.i.121-23). The Duchess’s silence allowed Ferdinand to imagine that her very blood was not just like his but identical to it. This projection of himself onto her mimics what Berger sees as the appeal of the artfully artless lady as described by Castiglione’s Count Ludovico: “The mysterious she who makes her face the index of his mind by withdrawing behind the mirror that reflects his fantasy becomes the tain of the mirror, the ghost in the machine, the secret agent in the black box—a Pygmalion, perhaps, in her own right.” The Duchess is the ghost in the machine of the play, haunting Ferdinand even before her death because he cannot be certain that her motives are what he assumes them to be. Her outward performance of obedience cannot be verified because she refuses Ferdinand access to her internal motivation.

The audience, however, is granted that access and can evaluate how much of her public performance is artifice. This is, perhaps, the intervention that drama can make into the evaluation of sprezzatura. The dramatic conceit of the aside allows the audience to see what motivates any particular performance of speech or silence. When Cordelia refuses to play her prescribed part in Lear’s love test, the audience understands even before she speaks that she is “sure my love’s / More

9 Berger, 94.
ponderous than my tongue” (1.1.77-78). The paradox of Cordelia saying that she will not say is grounded in a clear articulation of her internal state that is not visible to her onstage interlocutors.

Lear remarks immediately upon what he perceives as a faulty performance: “How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little” (1.1.94). He sees her speech as too artless, requiring repair as well as correction. When her expansion on “nothing” establishes the mathematical logic of her reserving “half my love” for “that lord whose hand must take my plight,” Lear continues to critique her performance, asking “But goes thy heart with this?” (101, 91, 105). Where her first response of “nothing” seemed too bare, her elaboration seems too artful to represent her actual emotional state. Lear is indeed correct to be suspicious of Cordelia’s performance—her statements are not a reflection of the complexity of her true feelings. For Cordelia, silence is the proper representation of love: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” (62) implies that in speaking love, Cordelia necessarily speaks silence, which returns us to her paradox of saying that she will not say.

France recognizes this paradox as an essential feature of Cordelia’s self-representation, praising her as “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor, / Most choice forsaken and most loved despised” (1.1.252-53). The rhetorical wit necessary to his own role as courtier to Lear and suitor to Cordelia has prepared France for engaging with Cordelia’s own performance of sprezzatura. The active results of her performance are immediately obvious: she provokes the men who determine her future to respond in ways that reveal their inner selves. Lear lashes out, Burgundy retreats, and France matches her.

After absenting herself from the main action of the play, Cordelia becomes, like the Duchess, the ghost in the machine. Her initial statement of “nothing” becomes the determining

---

concept of the play as Lear’s retinue and then his own identity diminishes. When she returns to the stage, Lear immediately projects his own fantasies of political disengagement and personal engagement onto her, imagining that

We two alone will sing like birds i’the cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too —
Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out —

(5.3.8-15)

The focus on speech in this passage sits in counterpoint to the deliberate reticence that marked Cordelia’s earlier appearance. Lear is still trying to make Cordelia produce the speech he wants, but rather than demanding it he now presents an environment that welcomes that speech. Even this fantasy, however, is denied by the play; Cordelia exits without speaking again and is dead the next time we see her. The access to her internal thoughts granted the audience in the first act is withheld in the last, but Cordelia’s commitment to silence as an effective self-representational technique is affirmed.

It is worth noting of these three cases, two women performing silence wind up dead by the end of the play and the other is imprisoned. The voluntary, strategic silences of Cordelia and the Duchess are transformed into the enforced silence of the grave; Isabella is removed from the public arena in which her whispers can be effective. These endings suggest that the social environment of this play is ultimate governed by the gynephobia Berger identifies. Silence preserves a space for
feminine self-representation by destabilizing masculine projections, which, in turn, undermines men’s idea of self. If one of the ways men represent themselves is through reflection in women, women whose own self-representations do not engage with men cannot remain a part of that social interaction. It is the very power of voluntary silence that requires its extermination.

These three cases just begin to sketch out the dimensions of speech and silence in the construction of feminine sprezzatura, and this brief essay cannot hope to include the broader project of considering how sprezzatura is translated onto the English stage. The class and gender norms encoded by sprezzatura are necessarily subverted even as they are upheld by lower-class male actors playing noble women. My limited range of cases also excludes women for whom silence is not initially a choice, such as tongueless Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, or who wield silence as punishment, as Hero in *Much Ado* does. These further aspects provide opportunities for investigating how early modern dramatic literature helped to codify and deconstruct the image of the *donna di palazzo.*