

DEFINING ABSENCE:

READING FEMALE SILENCE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE 1580-1640

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines literary representations of intentionally silent women in the works of both male and female English writers between 1580 and 1640. Asserting that the early modern discourse of feminine silence encompasses more than chastity and obedience, this study demonstrates that across different literary genres, women's chosen silences function as active modes of communication, capable of expressing complex subject positions. Ostensibly virtuous, female characters' silences can also simultaneously embody other less licit meanings such as anger, rebellion, and erotic love. Further, this dissertation argues that it is anachronistic for modern scholars to apply the critical metaphor of the voice to early modern women. Rather than equating discursive agency with the speaking voice, critical vocabulary must also include nonverbal signifying acts. In contrast to French feminist assessments of female silences as liberating escapes from patriarchal language into essentialized indeterminacy, I focus on writers' attempts to make the female silences comprehensible in the historically specific context of their contemporary social and literary discourses of gender.

Chapter 1 posits that female silences heighten pleasurable and painful dramatic irony. Sustained paradoxes in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing* and Jonson's *Epicoene: Or, the Silent Woman* raise the problem of perceiving an "authentic" gendered subject through exterior appearance. Chapter 2 compares the intentional silences enacted by Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and by Mariam in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam*. Both characters define their disobedient refusals to speak in terms of physical and self-representational "honesty" and, in doing so, differentiate between their individual and political subject positions. Chapter 3 considers the four court masques Ben Jonson wrote for Queen Anna—*The Masque of Blackness*, *The Masque of Beauty*, *The Masque of Queens*, and *Love Freed from Ignorance and Folly*—and examines how the noblewomen's patronage and performance actively contributed to a complex aesthetic field that required them to be silent. Chapter 4 asserts that intentional female silences in Mary Wroth's *Countess of Montgomery's Urania* comprise a chaste mode of communicating erotic love and reproach. Wroth inducts her readers into her coterie by teaching them to decode the diverse meanings of these "ciphers."