

Silence and the Collapse of Difference in Tom Stoppard's
Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead

by Maria Spiegel

Guil: What's the dumbshow for?

Player: Well, it's a device really—it makes the action that follows more or less comprehensible; you understand, we are tied down to a language which makes up in obscurity what it lacks in style.

*(Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, 77)*¹

Tom Stoppard tucks this exchange into the midpoint of Act II – the middle of the middle act of his *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. Suitably, then, the passage considers two of the play's central motifs: silence and metatheatricality. In emphasizing the importance of silence and the inadequacy of words, the player proves doubly self-referencing. Not only does he channel his writer's vision of the English language, but he also presents a new vision of silence, transforming it into a metatheatrical construct, self-consciously employed by actors to benefit their audience. We have already seen silence employed so, in our reading of Stoppard's careful stage directions. "*Beat*," Stoppard writes, giving us time to figure out a joke, and to laugh at it; "*good pause*," he writes, and "*small pause*," and just "*pause*."² These pauses preserve natural gaps in speaking, but many also function as moments of actor-audience recognition. Actors anticipate laughter, thought, or applause, and continue acting only when their audience responds. Silence thus removes momentarily the fiction by which drama operates – that stage and hall inhabit separate realities – and so unites artist and spectator as participants in theatre.

¹ Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

² e.g. 46, 60, 13, 16.

Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the player recognize the power of silence to unify disparate realities. They imagine a silence that collapses oppositions, placing actor and audience into a shared world. In this world, though, silence is malignant, metatheatricality dangerous, and so the artists retreat again into fiction.

On page 62, Guil introduces the theme of silence with a threat of silencing: he warns the player to “mind your tongue, or we’ll have it out and throw the rest of you away, like a nightingale at a Roman feast.” Comparison in this threat enacts the collapse of oppositions: it eliminates both the distinction between a nightingale and an actor and, more importantly, the distinction between a dead songbird and a mute performer. The horror of the threat depends on its equation of muteness with death and its proposal that a man without a voice is disposable. Ros and Guil dwell on the horror of human silence in their elaborations on this first threat:

Ros: Took the very words out of my mouth.
Guil: You’d be *lost* for words.
Ros: You’d be tongue-tied.
Guil: Like a mute in a monologue.
Ros: Like a nightingale at a Roman feast. (*Ibid.*)

Similes reappear here, yet these similes are strange. In a world where an actor has literally lost his tongue but remains an actor, he becomes a mute in a monologue – not the likeness of one. Perhaps muteness strips the artist of his status, reducing him to manhood. If we accept that Ros and Guil play “men” while the player is the “actor,” this simile erases their difference in position. Ros’ simile performs a similar act, rendering him indistinguishable from Guil. By repeating Guil’s earlier line – and by parroting Guil from the beginning of this passage – Ros likens himself to his companion. The hypothetical, silent world of these comparisons thus diminishes the characters’ individuality.

The remainder of Ros' and Guil's dialogue depicts the further decay of "difference." It reveals, first of all, that the hypothetical world has been realized. Ros and Guil's swift dialogue performs their threat that the player's "lines will be cut," while the player at Hamlet's request will direct a dumbshow (*Ibid.*). The player, in an extended "dramatic pause," seems unable to "find his tongue" (*Ibid.*). Though after this "find your tongue" remark the pair returns to hypothetical considerations, these considerations address explicitly the collapsing inward of difference:

Guil: You'll never *find* your tongue.
Ros: Lick your lips.
Guil: Taste your tears.
Ros: Your breakfast.
Guil: You won't know the difference.
Ros: There won't be any.
Guil: We'll take the very words out of your mouth.
(62-63)

Guil's turn at the end of this passage to Ros' earlier line completes a circle of imitations and comparisons that paint the pair and the player in the same colors. Guil, mimicking Ros, replaces Ros' implicit "Guil" with a "We" that includes both him and Ros, and instead of Ros' mouth Guil mentions the player's. That each character by now has played another's role signifies the erosion of categorical status – even of unique character. Ros, Guil, and the player, by the end of these lines, share the same name: man.

The player's next two speeches acknowledge this loss of status. Though they do not provide direct commentary on silence or its unifying powers, they do inform our study of the topic. They emphasize the players' loss of the "single assumption that makes our existence viable—that somebody is *watching*" (63). This line suggests that not being watched is more devastating than not being heard – that the loss of an audience is more devastating than the loss of speech, than silence. Yet this relationship does not simplify

so easily, since the absence of observers implies an actor's practical muteness: if no one is near enough to watch, then no one can hear, and the players thus inhabit a silent world – one that will not speak back, one that refuses to respond correctly.

This malfunctioning world is terrifying, and the player allows us to experience its terror by collapsing the boundaries between actor and audience. Like a magician revealing the trick behind his sleight of hand, the player reveals the mechanism behind his acting – his fundamental assumption – and so the player shares with us the tools to act ourselves. We complete the role-reversal when we empathize with the player, when we share the humanness he shows to us. He admits to “humiliation” at being abandoned, and to feeling “stripped naked in the middle of nowhere” (*Ibid.*). The actor no longer plays at emotion but rather feels it, indeed “*bursts out*” with it (*Ibid.*). His expressions of emotion remind us of our shared humanness. So while the player describes actors as “the opposite of people,” we nonetheless imagine ourselves as “demented children mincing about...killing each other with wooden swords” and hurling “hollow protestations of faith...after empty promises of vengeance” (*Ibid.*). The vividness of these images allows us to leave the theatre and inhabit the player's place in the “thin, unpopulated air” (*Ibid.*).

Once we have left the theatre to fill the player's role, he takes ours. The player commands his audience – ostensibly Ros and Guil, but his greater audience as well – to “think in your head, *now*, think of the most...*private...secret...intimate...thing* you have ever done in the knowledge of its privacy” (63-64). “A *good pause*” aimed at the audience follows this injunction, and in this silence we have a moment of audience-actor recognition (*Ibid.*). The player responds by exclaiming, “*Well, I saw you do it*” and with these words transforms himself momentarily into a spectator (*Ibid.*). Ros returns us to our

seats and the player to the stage by accusing him of lying, but the player never admits doing so.

The player does confess, however, the root of his emotions and the force behind his metatheatrical outburst: silence. During his dramatic piece, the “murderer’s long soliloquy” gave him a moment of personal silence in which to search for his audience, and silence confirmed Ros’ and Guil’s absence (64). Silence here is malignant, and it offends the actor by stripping him of his imagined opposition: he is the observed, not the observer. The player’s picture of the scene in the woods captures silence as the great destroyer of such oppositions. We see it best in this line: “Our heads began to move, wary as lizards, the corpse of unsullied Rosalinda peeped through his fingers, and the King faltered” (*Ibid.*). This single sentence provides a catalogue of metaphors that collapse the differences between man and animal (“our heads began to move, wary as lizards”), the dead and the living (“the corpse...peeped through his fingers”), man and woman (“Rosalinda peeped through his fingers”). Silence crumbles these imagined oppositions and returns the actors to the realm of their audience – which of course is not there: “No one shouted at us. The silence was unbreakable, it imposed itself on us; it was obscene,” the player recounts (*Ibid.*). That the actors in response redress as men, taking off their “crowns and swords and cloth of gold, and [moving] silent on the road to Elsinore,” marks another breakdown of the barrier between the fictional world and the real.

Stoppard asks us to consider a similar breakdown of the barrier separating the player’s fictional world and our real one by punctuating the player’s speech with this cue: “*Silence*” (*Ibid.*). This silence demands our thought, and for a moment we share the player’s reality: we feel the chill of silence because it hits us in our seats. Yet in the next

stage direction Guil rejects this shared reality. He “*claps solo with slow measured irony*” and then insults the player for being “rather strong on metaphor” and for re-creating action (*Ibid.*); he accuses the player of performance and denies the player’s truth.

This denial of the player’s integrity returns Guil to his reality – which is, to us, fiction – and so he rebuilds the boundary that separates us. Ros also attempts to restore oppositions: “you can’t treat royalty like people with normal perverted desires,” he instructs the player (65). Yet we know the court of Elsinore suffers from “normal perverted desires,” and we would not categorize Stoppard’s play, *Hamlet*, or *The Murder of Gonzago* as “good clean show[s] suitable for all the family” (*Ibid.*).

While Ros and Guil reject the player’s world in order to remain safely in their own, we need not do so. We are not actors. We need not preserve a fiction that “somebody is *watching*,” and we need not play to an imaginary audience (62). Since the player’s speech does not endanger us, then, we can recognize its wisdom and truth: we too are hurling empty words and poses into a silent universe. Yet as the players find an audience in Ros and Guil, and in us, so might we find audience in our fellow man. Silence, as we recall from the player’s explanation of the dumbshow, is instructive: it allows us to understand each other’s actions. Furthermore, silence responds to everyone the same way, and we have seen that it collapses our differences. In this vision, silence loses its malignancy – we ought not fear it. Perhaps the players’ response to silence then might lose its gloom, and we might also shed our “crowns and swords and cloth of gold” – markers of imagined distinction – and trudge forward together (64). This, I think, is the redeeming message in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*: that through coldness and silence, we share our humanity. Though the heavens remain silent, though

gods no longer drop from the sky, though Claudius does not get the chance to pray, and while, in general, our dialogue with the gods has withered, our human dialogue is sharper and wittier, and we should not ask for more.

Works Cited

Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.