

‘Tongue-tied by authority’: Shakespeare Silenced

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Why do Shakespeare’s works endure? Certainly, he produced memorable tragic heroes and heroines in his genius-level drama and poetry, and moulded the English language into new and permanent forms: the phrase-maker extraordinaire, father of a hundred aphorisms. But though English has moved on to the point that studying Shakespeare can feel as taxing as learning the Latin and Greek that Ben Jonson claimed he had barely mastered, Shakespeare’s plays continue to speak to modern audiences for one single reason: his deep comprehension, and near-forensic examination, of human emotions.

The emotional life of Shakespeare’s protagonists is rich and nuanced. Even when depicting what we might dare call pure evil, his portrayal of Richard III, the motivating emotions are comprehensible: Shakespeare’s Richard is no pantomime villain, and it is his deeply human complexity which continues to render him fascinating to both actors and audiences. Developing a new use for the soliloquy that Marlowe debuted in his *Doctor Faustus*, Shakespeare allows us into the minds of his flawed protagonists so that we can hear them not just think, but feel. Thus we witness directly, and feel empathetically, the anguish of Brutus’s decision to join in the assassination of Caesar; Hamlet’s painful vacillation; Lear’s soul-destroying regret.

The emotional depth of Shakespeare’s characters is what imbues his plays with the vitality to survive close to half a millennium on the public stage, when those of contemporary

genius Ben Jonson are rarely performed: we can still learn about ourselves from Shakespeare. But where can we learn about Shakespeare's inner life? The life which imbued him with sufficiently profound emotional experiences to write about human passions with such depth and clarity? If Shakespeare's passions are to be found anywhere, it is surely in the Sonnets.

Though some scholars argue that Shakespeare's sonnets should not be read biographically, but seen rather as a response to, and product of, the Elizabethan vogue for sonneteering, there is a long history of scholarly attempts to interrogate the sonnets for biographical detail. Paul Edmondson & Stanley Wells, having reviewed both sides of the argument, conclude: 'though Shakespeare's sonnets, like all his work, unquestionably reflect his reading, and though not all of them are intimate in tone, it is not unreasonable to look in them for reflections of his personal experience' (Edmondson and Wells, 21). Reading the mini-sequence known as the Rival Poet sonnets, for example, the personal passions involved are hard to ignore.

Interestingly, these passions appear to leave him tongue-tied. In Sonnet 80, he says

O, how I faint when I of you do write,
 Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
 And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
 To make me tongue-tied, speaking of your fame! (1-4)

In Sonnet 85 the motif continues.

My tongue-tied Muse in manners holds her still,
 While comments of your praise, richly compiled,
 Reserve their character with golden quill
 And precious phrase by all the Muses filed. (1-4)

In both these poems, Shakespeare claims to be unable to compete with the praises his rival showers upon the shared object of their affection, as if all possible words are used up.

But in Sonnet 86 we are forced to question whether the rival poet's skill at praise is the only reason that Shakespeare is tongue-tied.

Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
 Bound for the prize of all too precious you,
 That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,
 Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?
 Was it his spirit, by spirits taught to write
 Above a mortal pitch, that struck me dead?
 No, neither he, nor his compeers by night
 Giving him aid, my verse astonished.
 He, nor that affable familiar ghost
 Which nightly gulls him with intelligence
 As victors of my silence cannot boast;
 I was not sick of any fear from thence:
 But when your countenance fill'd up his line,
 Then lack'd I matter; that enfeebled mine.

Though we can only guess at the precise emotions fuelling the apparent hyperbole of a poet who feels another poet's writing 'struck [him] dead', there is no question that this poem was prompted by a real emotional experience. Were it a simple exercise in sonnet practice, designed for public consumption, the referents would not be so obscure. Instead, this is an intensely personal poem which only those closest to the poet could be expected to fully understand.

According to this poem, the rival poet has unworldly help: he is 'by spirits taught to write/above a mortal pitch'. It was for this reason that George Chapman, who claimed to have been visited and assisted by the ghost of Homer while writing his translation of the Illiad (published 1598), was first suggested as the Rival Poet by William Minto in 1874, with support

from A Acheson in 1903 and J M Robertson in 1926. We are long past the point where trying to identify the subjects of Shakespeare's Sonnets is considered a fruitful occupation, but references to help from the spirit world surfaces again as the rival poets' 'compeers by night/Giving him aid' (line 7/8) and more specifically 'that affable familiar ghost / which night gulls him with intelligence' (line 9/10). But then we reach the poem's most enigmatic line: 'as victors of my silence cannot boast'. This surely begs two questions. What silence? What victors? The link to the preceding line is ambiguous. Grammatically it is possible that it is the 'affable familiar ghost' which the victors of the poet's silence don't possess. But the more likely referent is the later one: the victors of Shakespeare's silence cannot boast intelligence, which in this context means knowledge or information. The poem returns to a couplet that contains only three people: I, he, and you. But even as we are left with a seeming description of writer's block, those other presences – the 'victors of my silence' – hang in the air like apparitions.

Aside from a brief reference to 'tongue-tied patience' in the Dark Lady sonnets, the phrase 'tongue-tied' occurs in just one further poem. Sonnet 66 is one of three sonnets which are strikingly different from all the others published in the 1609 quarto.¹ With anaphora the sole rhetorical device (ten of its lines begin 'And'), none of the balance or word-play of Shakespeare's other sonnets, no octave-sestet division, and a 'turn' only in the very last line, it is a relentless list of things with which the poet is so fed up that he feels suicidal.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As, to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,

¹ The other 'anomalous' sonnets are 145, the 'hate away' sonnet, written in tetrameter, and Sonnet 126, which has only 12 lines.

And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
 And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
 And strength by limping sway disabled,
 And art made tongue-tied by authority,
 And folly doctor-like controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill:
 Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
 Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.

He does not say that it is *his* art that is ‘made tongue-tied by authority’. But when as prolific a writer as Shakespeare is claiming elsewhere in the same sequence that there are ‘victors of [his] silence’, is it worth casting an eye over the oppressive nature of the regime in which he was living.

The late 16th and early 17th century was a dangerous age in which to be a writer in England. There was no such thing as freedom of speech. Those who wrote works that upset others (particularly if those others were powerful, or had powerful friends) could easily find themselves in prison, and worse. A famous example is that of John Stubbs who in 1579, when Shakespeare was just 15, published his opinions about the Queen’s proposed marriage to the Duke of Anjou and Alençon in a pamphlet entitled *The Discovery of a Gaping Gulf*. In this pamphlet he argued that the queen, at forty-six, was too old to have children, making the marriage pointless. The Queen was incensed and John Stubbs was arrested, along with his publisher William Page and his printer Hugh Singleton. On 13 October all three were found guilty and were sentenced to have their hands cut off. Hugh Singleton, being very elderly, had his sentence rescinded but both John Stubbs and William Page had their right hands cut off in the market place in Westminster on 3 November. It took three blows to sever Stubbs’s hand (Mears).

If this penalty was particularly severe, it was nevertheless a strong indication that writing was a dangerous business. Despite peddling fictions, the writers of plays were not exempt. Though Shakespeare's era has long been depicted as a Golden Age of wit and manners, writers of that era were living under a repressive regime. Those in power were extremely conscious of the power of words to influence opinion and were paranoid about being criticised, mocked, or satirised. A number of the age's most successful writers felt the sharp end of this particular stick.

Ben Jonson was arrested and imprisoned for a play he co-wrote with Thomas Nashe, *The Isle of Dogs* (1597). We have no idea why because all copies of the play have been destroyed. He was questioned by the Privy Council about his portrayal of political corruption in *Sejanus* (1603) and was imprisoned again, along with co-author George Chapman, for offending King James I with an anti-Scottish reference in *Eastward Ho* (1605). The other author of *Eastward Ho*, John Marston, fled to escape imprisonment. Ben Jonson reported later that they were threatened with having their noses and ears cut off. Though in this case they were reprieved, physical punishments were a very real possibility.

The only known portrait of Thomas Nashe is a woodcut that shows him as a prisoner, with his legs chained together. He was imprisoned for writing *Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem*, which offended the powers-that-be with a satirical portrait of London. Presumably his time in prison was not something he wished to repeat; endangered as a co-author of the *Isle of Dogs*, he escaped to the country when Ben Jonson was arrested. His house was raided in his absence and he remained away from London, effectively exiled in Norfolk.

Two years later in 1599, his name featured prominently on The Bishops' Ban. Issued jointly by the Archbishop of Canterbury (the chief censor of publications) and the Bishop of London, this was a list of books to be banned and brought to Stationer's Hall to be burnt. In what has been described as 'the most sweeping and stringent instance of early modern censorship' (Shuger 89), a number of individual titles were named, chiefly satires, and all histories and plays not specifically licensed. The final line of the ban targeted everything Thomas Nashe had written and would write in future:

'That all NASHes books and Doctor HARVEYs books be taken wheresoever they may be found and that none of their bookes be ever printed hereafter.'

The other person whose entire oeuvre was outlawed in the Bishops' Ban was Gabriel Harvey. He, too, had been imprisoned for his writing. In *Three Letters*, a published correspondence between him and the poet Edmund Spenser, he had referred unflatteringly to someone he referred to as Spenser's 'old controller'. The Controller of the Royal Household, Sir James Croft, took this to be a reference to him and had Harvey thrown in the Fleet Prison until Harvey managed to convince the Privy Council that he had, in fact, been referring to someone else (who was conveniently dead).

One didn't even have to publish a work to be at risk. Playwright Thomas Kyd, author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, was arrested in the wake of government anger about what is now known as the Dutch Church libel; a poem, written in the style of his former room-mate, Christopher Marlowe, which had been posted on the wall of a church frequented by Huguenot immigrants. The Privy Council sanctioned the use of torture to discover the author of the poem. Though the

author wasn't, as far as we know, Thomas Kyd, he never recovered from his treatment in Bridewell prison and died the following year. Christopher Marlowe was arrested soon after and released on condition he report daily to 'their Lordships' (the Privy Council), apparently being killed in a fight just ten days later.

Half of the Shakespeare canon was not published until the First Folio of 1623. The surviving documentation of performances is too partial to know how many of the plays eventually published in the First Folio actually made it on to the stage. Shakespeare was never to our knowledge arrested or imprisoned for his writing, but he cannot have been unaffected by the treatment of the writers around him. And we do know that in around 1593 or 1594, Shakespeare was particularly focused on the theme of a person being brutally silenced.

His second publication, *The Rape of Lucrece*, retells at length Tarquin's rape of his friend's wife, Lucretia, an event recounted in Livy's *History of Rome* and versified in Ovid's *Fasti*. Shakespeare's extended version of the tale features a surprisingly outspoken heroine. As Jonathan Post points out in the *Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry* (418),

'In both Livy and Ovid [s versions of the rape], only Tarquin speaks during the rape scene; Livy's Tarquin commands Lucretia's silence, while Ovid describes her as mute with fear (Fasti 2.797-9)... Despite her 'trembling fear' (line 511), by contrast, Shakespeare's Lucrece reasons with Tarquin, continuing to plead after he bids her 'Have done' (line 645) and, after being gagged, uttering 'piteous clamours in her head' (line 681).'

Nevertheless, in line with the sources, Lucrece is gagged – is literally tongue-tied – before being violated against her will. Afterwards, both Shakespeare and then Lucrece herself

invoke Philomela, who was raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus (1129-34). Tereus demanded Philomela be silent, and when she angered him by refusing, cut out her tongue. But Philomela wove her story into a tapestry and sent it to Procne, who avenged her sister by killing and cooking her son by Tereus, and feeding the dish to her husband. Chased by an enraged Tereus, the sisters prayed to be transformed in birds: Philomela became a nightingale, the female of which, in nature, cannot sing. Thus Lucrece is invoking another woman silenced by force. And though Lucrece speaks at length once Tarquin has left – for 422 lines, no less² -- it is only to herself. When her maid enters and (finally) dares to ask what is wrong, Lucrece answers

O, peace! . . . if it should be told,
 The repetition cannot make it less;
 For more it is than I can well express:
 And that deep torture may be call'd a hell
 When more is felt than one hath power to tell. (1336-1340)

She asks her maid to get her paper, ink and pen to write a letter to her husband. While waiting for his reply she spends 200 lines gazing at a painting of the battle of Troy, empathising most fiercely with the figure of Hecuba, distraught at the murder of Priam³ but unable to express it. Lucrece ‘swears [the painter] did her wrong,/To give her so much grief and not a tongue. Not long after, her husband arrives, and unable to say what has happened beyond speaking Tarquin’s name – ‘But more than ‘he’ her poor tongue could not speak’ – she kills herself.

Shakespeare’s bloodiest play, *Titus Andronicus*, whose first recorded performance is in the same year that *Lucrece* was published, similarly features a raped and silenced woman. In Lavinia’s case her silencing could not be more brutal. To prevent her from speaking of their

² Lines 797-1129 minus two 7-line stanzas, plus another 13 stanzas up to 1262.

³ Note, the scene so beloved of Hamlet’s player.

crime, Demetrius and Chiron cut out her tongue, like Ovid's Philomela. But to ensure she cannot tell her story in any other way, by tapestry-sewing or by writing, they also cut off her hands. On seeing his niece bleeding from her hands and stumps, Marcus Andronicus at once discerns that what has happened, again – like Lucrece – invoking the story of Philomela's rape and silencing by Tereus:

Fair Philomela, she but lost her tongue,
And in a tedious sampler sew'd her mind:
But lovely niece, that means is cut from thee. (2.4.38—40)⁴

In Act 4 Scene 1, the reference is repeated with a physical prop for emphasis. Lavinia chases down her nephew for the book under his arm, a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. With her stumps and her father's help, Lavinia opens the page at the story of Philomela, and even as her father wonders aloud who raped his daughter he invokes Tarquin's rape of Lucrece. Finally Lavinia guides her father's staff, with her mouth and her stumps, to write the names of her rapists in the dirt. Her father's response mirrors that of Procne's in the Philomela myth: he kills and bakes the rapists, and makes their mother eat them.

Some scholars argue that *Titus Andronicus*, with its less-than elegant end-stopped pentameter and its raw themes of violence and revenge, was written in 1589 or even earlier. But we have no evidence of its existence before 1594. In Henslowe's diary, its first performance in January 1594 was marked as 'ne', which many scholars take to mean 'new'.⁵ Jonathan Bate notes that the title page, which unusually claims it was performed by three different playing companies, lacks the almost ubiquitous phrase 'sundry times', suggesting the play was so new it

⁴ All line numbers are taken from the Oxford Shakespeare (Wells).

⁵ Winifred Frizer's 1991 argument that 'ne' indicated a play transferred from the theatre at Newington Butts has been adopted by Brian Vickers, but few others.

had barely been played at all. In addition he detects features of the play which tie it both to Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (completed 27 June 1593), and to George Peele's *The Honour of the Garter* (written to commemorate the installation of the Earl of Derby as a knight of the garter on 26 June 1593), suggesting *Titus Andronicus* was written in the latter half of 1593 (Bate 1995, 66-79). Its thematic entwining with the *Rape of Lucrece* (published 1594) argues for its being written at a similar time.

Unlike the majority of Shakespeare's canon, there is no established source for *Titus Andronicus*. A prose version of the story, and a ballad, appeared in 1594, but may well have been derived from the play.⁶ Why might Shakespeare have been so obsessed with the theme of women who were not only raped but then powerfully (and physically) silenced in 1593/4, when these two works surfaced? Perhaps we might take the heavily end-stopped style of *Titus Andronicus*, with its Machiavellian antagonist Aaron, as a clue, for there is no Shakespearean play that is more Marlovian.

Shakespeare's debt to Marlowe is widely acknowledged; Robert Logan speaks of 'the firmness with which Marlowe's influence rooted itself in Shakespeare and developed, for it continued to thrive for 18 years after Marlowe's death, roughly from 1593-1611, the remainder of Shakespeare's career' (Logan 8). Peter Ackroyd says 'Marlowe was the contemporary writer that most exercised him. . . . He haunts Shakespeare's expression, like a figure standing by his shoulder' (Ackroyd 140). Stephen Greenblatt says of the influence of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* on Shakespeare that 'from its effect upon his early work, it appears to have had upon him an intense, visceral, indeed life-transforming impact' (Greenblatt 189). Russ McDonald calls

⁶ There is no consensus over which came first, but Bate believes the play predated both the ballad and the prose versions.

Marlowe 'one of Shakespeare's most influential teachers,' claiming 'that Shakespeare's plays would have been very different from what they are – and may not have been at all – were it not for the Marlovian example' (McDonald 67). Harold Bloom calls Marlowe 'Shakespeare's starting point, curiously difficult for the young Shakespeare to exorcise completely' (Bloom 10). Bloom refers to 1593, the year preceding the one in which both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* surfaced, as 'the year of Marlowe's extinction by the authorities.'

I contend that Marlowe's sudden extinction – the silencing by the authorities of the writer whom Shakespeare consistently emulated – explains the motif of women overpowered, raped, and silenced that appears in both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*. Taking Philomela's mutilation one step further, Shakespeare's Lavinia is prevented not only from speaking, but from writing, in order to ensure her story is never told. But Shakespeare tells it; and finds a way, too, for her to name her attackers.

It would not be surprising for Shakespeare to be deeply affected by Marlowe's death. Jonathan Bate, speaking of the impact of that event, says 'Shakespeare, I suggest, only became Shakespeare because of the death of Marlowe. And he remained peculiarly haunted by that death' (Bate 2008, 105). That haunting begins with the repeated motif of raped and silenced women: powerless to defend themselves against their attackers, they are gagged or mutilated, their reputations destroyed and, through death or mutilation, stripped of the means of speaking or writing their stories.

Might Shakespeare's obsession with Marlowe's silencing also explain why his apparently innocuous comedy was 'stayed' in 1600? *As You Like It* was listed in the Stationer's Register along with *Every Man In His Humour*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and '*Henry the Fifth*'⁷ – all four marked 'to be staid'. Unlike the other three plays, whose 'stays' were quickly lifted, *As You Like It* was not printed for another 23 years. Having considered various theories for the play remaining unpublished, Juliet Dusinberre, editor of the Arden edition of the play, says 'There may have been some censorship issue which impeded the printing of *As You Like It*. *Troilus and Cressida* was 'staid' until permission was received from the clerical authorities for its printing, and it is possible that *As You Like It* also required some kind of authorization which was not immediately forthcoming' (Dusinberre 123). Dusinberre favours the suggestion of the editor of the Oxford edition, Alan Brissenden, that the problem for the censors may centre on Jaques, a name considered lavatorial for being a near-homophone of 'jakes', arguing that it might have been particularly sensitive if it was considered to allude to 1596's *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (which puns on 'A-jakes), whose author John Harrington was the Queen's godson.

'First, the name Jaques itself, with its lavatorial/Harrington associations; second, the fact that Harrington was the Queen's godson; third, the satirical qualities of the role; fourth, the relationship of Harrington with the Earl of Essex, who was out of favour with the Queen even before he went to Ireland. On his unexpected return in September [1599] Essex was taken into custody, and not released until the next August.' (Brissenden 3-4)

Though it is true that Harrington had displeased the queen with his 1596 publication (as much for a perceived slight to the Earl of Leicester as for its ostensible subject, the flush toilet), she had nevertheless subsequently asked him to install his invention in Richmond Palace. And though he was one of many men knighted by Essex on the Irish campaign of 1599, and returned

⁷ Peter Blayney has demonstrated this play was 2 *Henry IV* rather than *Henry V*. See Arden edition of *As You Like It* (Dusinberre, 121).

to England to find himself ‘sharing in the wrath which Elizabeth vented at Essex’ he was very quickly ‘granted a private audience and restored to favour’. (Scott-Warren)

Therefore by April 4 1600, when *As You Like It* was entered into the stationer’s register, the relationship between Harington and Essex was unlikely to have been an issue for the censors. The ‘satirical qualities of the role’ are minor compared with the satirical qualities of *Every Man In His Humour*, whose ‘stay’ was quickly lifted. Indeed, though *As You Like It* might be read as a satire on pastoral comedies, Jaques is more cynical than satirical, and is characterised throughout the play as ‘melancholy’. Brissenden’s third and fourth points, therefore, carry little weight, and we must lean more heavily upon the first two points, which depend upon us accepting that the name Jaques was an allusion to John Harington, the queen’s godson.

The evidence to support this popular theory appears to be minimal, resting largely on the fact that Harington had become associated with another name punning on ‘jakes’, Ajax.⁸ The placement of ‘Jaques’ within the iambic line – ‘The melancholy Jaques grieves at that’ – indicates that it should be pronounced as two syllables, the first of which is ‘jake’ and the second ending in sibilance.⁹ But even though Touchstone gives a nod to this interpretation, at one point referring to Jaques as ‘Good master What-ye-call-t’, there’s no reason to suppose that a reference to ‘jakes’ is an allusion to John Harington. Harington’s book, published four years previously under the banner ‘A New Discourse of a Stale Subject’ was somewhat of a ‘stale subject’ itself. The term ‘jakes’, however, was permanently topical; it had been slang for a latrine since the 15th

⁸ This argument is supported by the possibility that Shakespeare was inspired to use the name Orlando (‘Rosader’ in Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde*) by Harington’s popular translation of *Orlando Furioso*. Even if this were so, however, it does not follow that ‘Jaques’ is meant to allude to Harington.

⁹ Helge Kökeritz argues for ‘Jake-is’ against the 19th century tradition of ‘Jake-weez or ‘Jake-wis’.

century (the *OED* lists a first usage at 1432). It is more likely, therefore, that Shakespeare was simply indulging in a bawdy but veiled pun of the kind that litters his plays (such as Hamlet's 'country matters'). Had it disturbed the censors, he or the company could very easily have effected a name change; *Henry IV*'s Sir John Oldcastle, Sir John Russell and Harvey, having apparently caused offence, were changed to Falstaff, Bardolph and Peto only a couple of years earlier.

So why was the publication of *As You Like It* stayed? Might it have had something to do with his unusually direct references to Marlowe? Phoebe refers to Marlowe as a 'dead shepherd' and quotes from Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*:

Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might:
'Who ever lov'd that lov'd not at first sight?' (3.5.82—83)

If the audience didn't recognise the quote, Rosalind speaks directly of Marlowe's famous poem:

Leander, he would have liv'd many a fair year, though Hero had
turn'd nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night; for,
good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont, and,
being taken with the cramp, was drown'd; and the foolish
chroniclers of that age found it was- Hero of Sestos. But these
are all lies: men have died from time to time, and worms have
eaten them, but not for love. (4.1.93—101)

'Men have died from time to time' indeed; in the previous act Touchstone makes what is widely recognised as a reference to Marlowe's murder over the 'reckoning' in a room in Mrs Bull's victualling house in Deptford:

When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a man's
good wit seconded with the forward child understanding, it 1515
strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room.
Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical. (3.3.9—13)

That Marlowe was killed in a small room over ‘the reckoning’ (the bill) counts as inside knowledge. No account of his death used this phrase, which was not publicly known until Leslie Hotson unearthed the inquest document in 1925. Shakespeare’s pun on ‘reckoning’ suggests greater forces behind Marlowe’s demise than the petty squabble described by the Queen’s coroner. These passages might be stripped out with little loss to the story. The fact they were not (and the play not published) might imply that Shakespeare was not willing to compromise on this subject. If so, we have a singular example of Shakespeare’s art being ‘tongue-tied by authority’.

Thomas Nashe, when he wrote a tribute to Marlowe in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) – that same work that Jonathan Bate as having influenced a feature of *Titus Andronicus* – referred to his friend as ‘Aretine’, a clear indication that it was not safe to refer to Marlowe directly. Charles Nicholl describe’s Nashe’s pseudonymous tribute as Nashe being ‘conscious of the limits and dangers of political comment’ (Nicholl 65). Marlowe expressed himself freely in his plays, in particularly touching repeatedly upon the subject of religion, one of the era’s most dangerous topics. If we are accept the notorious Baines Note as Marlowe verbatim, then it seems he took the great risk of speaking freely on the same subject. Whatever lewd stories were subsequently spun by gossip-mongers about the circumstances of Marlowe’s end, his close friends understood it was a silencing. Nash observed ‘His life he contemned in comparison of the liberty of speech’ (Nashe 2:265).

When Shakespeare speaks of ‘Art made tongue-tied by authority’ in Sonnet 66, he is surely speaking not only for Marlowe and other writers of the period, but for himself. In an era where it was dangerous to speak freely, writers were forced to modify their expression to keep

themselves safe. Defensive complexity explains the dominant Elizabethan writing style which to modern eyes is often rather impenetrable. Ben Jonson, for example, favours a kind of double-speak, open to opposing interpretations and thus inherently deniable. Showing a consciousness of the authorities perusing both their works, and the cryptic-to-the-point-of-encrypted nature of *Gorgon*, Thomas Nashe wrote:

‘O, we should haue the Proctors and Registers as busie with their Table-books as might bee, to gather phrases, and all the boyes in the Towne would be his clients to follow him. Marry, it were necessarie the Queenes Decypherer should bee one of the High Comissioners; for else other-while he would blurt out such Brachmannicall fuldde-fubs as no bodie should be able to vnderstand him.’
(Nashe 3:46)

Shakespeare, by comparison, retained significant clarity. His tack was to avoid religious subjects, and to cloak political ones in old clothes: stories of Tyrant would be set in Rome; warnings to monarchs would be addressed to those monarchs who had long since relinquished the throne. But above all, Shakespeare’s response to being ‘tongue-tied by authority’ was to re-tell existing stories with powerful morals in language of searing beauty. Though oppression is never something to celebrate, it can be the catalyst for extraordinary art.

Yet when Shakespeare speaks in Sonnet 86 of the ‘intelligence’ (the knowledge) he has kept from the ‘victors of [his] silence’ – a silence we cannot even perceive – we have to wonder how much beauty was lost.

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