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"Unruly Tongues"

Professor Mary Ann Bushman
Honors Convocation
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President Wilson, Colleagues, Students, and Friends:

I begin by pointing out the irony of my title for this occasion. Of all the students at this university, you the honorees who have excelled at all the academic challenges laid down for you—have most surely learned to rule your tongues. You have taken on the cumbersome vocabulary—whether scientific, mathematical, philosophical, or economic. You entered the academic community by means of your speech. And now you have no doubt become fluent in wielding your tongues (and computers) to produce the work for which you are being lauded here today. As an English teacher, of course, I too have learned to rule the tongue, both mine and others.' I monitor my own grammar, and when I hear the slightest possible error, I call in my tongue to change course. Students (and sometimes colleagues and strangers) quake before me as I nail yet another gaping flaw in parallel structure or a wayward pronoun reference.

But today, I want to speak briefly—very briefly—in praise of the unruly tongue--the tongue that exceeds it s bounds, that refuses silence, or if silenced, that makes sure its silence is deafeningly loud. And, of course, of Shakespeare.

I was struck recently by the extraordinary rigor with which students police their speech. The text for the day was *The Taming of the Shrew*, and as we explored what a shrew actually might be, I asked the class to ponder their current vocabulary for a commensurate term, a term that might offer us an entry into that foreign world of the play, the past. Hmm, we thought, a word for an outspoken, possibly unpleasant woman. A word came to mind, but there seemed to be some difficulty with actually saying the

word. Students offered various euphemisms, descriptions, abbreviations, until one student finally uttered the word. No thunder or lightening strikes occurred, thank goodness, but I marveled at the ferociousness with which these self-confident, intellectual, articulate women students policed their speech. As women, they found gender-inappropriate words positively explosive—and potentially contaminating, as if the very utterance of bad words would have dire consequences for their souls, bodies, selves.

As a product of the 1950's, I too recall the intense pressure to curb one's tongue. But my particular family background put me in a very different, and conflicted, relationship with bad words. I grew up in family that traditionally placed no boundaries on one's language. I heard what most people would consider "filthy" language as early as I can remember. My father seemed nearly unconscious of his continual profanity. He laced his ordinary conversation with references profane, sexual, excretory. Even a dinnertime recital of the day's events included most of today's prohibited words, treated merely as ordinary adjectives. His profanity was never personal nor cosmic; in fact, when he was utterly frustrated with a recalcitrant child or truck tire, his inevitable response was: "I'd a give 5 dollars for a new cuss word." Running a gas station for most of his life (and working exclusively around men) had no doubt fostered his ingenious talent, and his reputation among the local citizens for inventing forms of profanity was prodigious. I will venture offending my audience with an example. My father was an enthusiastic, if less than talented, golfer, who frequently peeled his tee shots off the fairway of his local course and into the one hundred-year-old oak trees that comprised the rough. His inevitable remark when he had performed his patented slice was, "Well, that's out where the hoot owls (do something species-inappropriate to) the chickens." Now, how he arrived at just that outrageous conjunction of words, that obscene depiction

of a foul sexual practice, I never knew, nor could I ever get him to talk about his creative process. Surely that particular phrase wasn't invented on the spot.

As the youngest child, only daughter and granddaughter, I was presumed, apparently, to be completely deaf to the language I heard around me. My mother, poor soul, must have done her best to discourage her toddler from experimenting with gender-inappropriate language. I do recall my first unpremeditated foray into using the family tongue. I was six years' old, I think. My mother was helping my brother with his English homework over the kitchen table, and I was operating, quite unsuccessfully, my toy sewing machine next to them. As the two of them quietly debated the proper way to diagram a complex sentence, I became completely frustrated and burst out with one of the family epithets I had heard since birth. In a normal 1950's American household, I can imagine the chaos and drama that would ensue: the soap, the lecture, the banishment to my room, the horror, the horror. But my mother and brother looked up, shocked for a moment, and then burst into laughter. Not exactly the right way to socialize a small, blonde, curly-haired six year old, I'm afraid. My mother did take on, however, a far more daunting task: to teach me how to do a semiotic analysis of speech communities unfamiliar to me so I wouldn't make "mistakes." She was careful to instruct me about tying up my newfound tongue in school, in church, in other people's houses, and about reading the telltale signs for inappropriateness, perhaps even intolerance. It was a valuable lesson: rather than treating my tongue as a sign for the state of my self, my very being, I learned instead to rule (or not rule) it as I chose. I sometimes wonder whether she realized how subversive a lesson she had taught me. I can only speculate that she did so because of a keen sense of equity. If her son were allowed to wield the family language, wasn't it only fair that her daughter be given equal access?

Perhaps this early exposure to ruling (and misruling) the tongue accounts for my lifelong engagement with Shakespeare. Shakespeare's language, so often deemed the best that has been thought or read, frequently exceeds our boundaries of the acceptable. His characters snarl at each other with such delights as "a turd in your teeth," "thou bull's pizzle," "you muddy conger," and (my personal favorite from *Twelfth Night*) a perfectly vicious and obscene-sounding command: "Sneck up." Shakespearean curses seem to cluster around themes of disease and sexuality. Caliban, the indigenous native of the island setting of *The Tempest*, famously curses his baptism into the King's English: "The red plague rid you for learning me your language." References to the symptoms of syphilis crop up frequently; and references to various parts of female anatomy are rife. In one of the first studies of vulgar language in Shakespeare's texts, Eric Partridge rejoices that the majority of Shakespeare's vulgar language is sexual, the non-sexual consisting of " Nothing more than a few references to urination and chamber-pots; to defecation and close stools; to flatulence; to podex and posteriors. Shakespeare was no coprophagist." To parse Partridge's inventive set of euphemisms, I will translate: close stools and chamber pots were different kinds of toilets; podex and posteriors are Latinate expressions for the behind. And a coprophagist is one who practices coprophagy: one who eats excrement. I note that for Partridge, writing in pre- and post-World War II Britain, Shakespeare's truly vulgar words refer to bodily elimination; words that demean sexuality, and especially female sexuality, are "normal," even praiseworthy and deserving of scholarly attention-- signs of Shakespeare's healthy, intellectual interest in sex, his "genius" as it were.

Like the women students in my class, Shakespeare's women characters also worry about the potential pollution of their identities if they utter bad words. Desdemona's

inability to say the word Othello has called her comes to mind, as does the French princess' shock, in *Henry the Fifth*, at learning the English word "foot," which resembles a word with salacious meaning in her native tongue. But a woman deemed a shrew, as Kate is in *Taming of the Shrew*, is not a woman who curses, who uses really bad words. A shrew is woman who is "cursed," "shrewd," "froward," "mad," according to the patriarchal figures who rule Shakespeare's play. It's not what she says that marks her as a shrew so much as when she says it. Kate's tongue is an instrument that signifies agency. She protests. She interrupts. She taunts. She even puns. She insists on her right to use her tongue (and occasionally her fists). But by the end of the play, as the title so famously promises, her tongue has been tamed. She has been, as her husband threatens her in the beginning, turned into a cate (a delicacy or pastry), conformable as other household cates. She's been domesticated. In the final act of the play, she speaks the language of tradition, of patriarchy. Her tongue has been tamed (and the evidence is that she now turns it primarily against women, her sister and other wives, as she lectures them on the "proper" role of the female). And I, for one, miss it. I mourn our cultural loss of that unruly, unbound tongue.

It is a reality that we all must learn to tame our tongues, to domesticate and socialize our rage. But we risk being silenced in all sorts of ways, or even worse, having our tongues taken from us and reassigned to the powers that be. It's important to loosen our tongues, to claim our linguistic birthright to rail, to complain, and yes, even to curse. After all, what's the worst that could happen? That we might be called the f-word, a feminist?. But here is practical strategy for defending the tongue. With *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* at hand, we should be able to marshall a rich, creative retort to those who would silence us. I shall choose one from Queen Margaret in *Richard the*

Third: “Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,” begone!