CHAPTER ONE

A SURVEY OF FOUL LANGUAGE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

“Our knowledge of the full variety of swearing in past cultures must necessarily be incomplete.” Geoffrey Hughes, Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English

WHAT IS FOUL LANGUAGE?

For anyone who has ever been embarrassed by letting an obscene word slip at the wrong time, it might come as a surprise to learn that in some languages such a mistake is impossible. Some languages simply have no obscene vocabulary.1 The native American Hopi language, for instance, has “no ‘proper’ versus ‘obscene’ words. All words are on the same mundane, matter-of-fact level.”2 When Hopi Chief Don Talayesva was introduced into the YMCA, he experienced a new linguistic possibility: “I learned to preach pretty well, and to cuss too. The Hopi language has no curse words in it. At first so much of it made me tired; but when I got into the habit myself it was alright.”3

But in this aspect, the Greeks and the Romans were like speakers of the majority of the world’s languages, having at their disposal a range of more and less polite terms for sexual and scatological topics.4

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1 David Crystal states that “several peoples, such as the Amerindians, Polynesians, and Japanese, swear very little, or not at all” (The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language [2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 61). Other languages without an obscene vocabulary could be added. There is, for instance, only one term for vulva, urinating, and defecating in the African languages Yoruba and Akan (Charles Muscatine, “The Fabliaux, Courtly Culture, and the (Re)Invention of Vulgarity,” in Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages [ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski; Leiden: Brill, 1998], 283, citing anthropologist D. Michael Warren).


Roman rhetoricians were in fact so concerned about certain terms that they advised not only against using them, but even against combining words that, when pronounced quickly, might resemble them. So *cum nobis* was to be avoided because it could sound like *cunnus.* Such an anxiety strikes us as more extreme than our own only until we imagine the embarrassment of the philosopher who, discussing the property of some item “X” as its “X-ness,” proceeds to discuss the properties of “A” or “P” in like manner.⁵

Among Greeks and Romans we can perceive a range of prohibitive forces against certain words that is not totally unlike our own. Cicero says that there were words “nobody would have tolerated”; words “they dare not utter”; words in which there was something “shocking” or “outrageous” (*flagitium*), or which were simply “not allowed” (*non licet*) or which “you are not able” (*non putes*) to say (*Fam.* 9.22.4).⁷ When the medical author Celsus had to discuss the genitalia, he preferred to use Greek rather than Latin words⁸ in much the same way a Victorian translation of Aristophanes might render his obscenities in Latin. Greek authors make similar references to certain terms that must be avoided⁹ or for which one must apologize.¹⁰ In short, it is clear that both languages


⁷ This letter, a *locus classicus* for the topic, is discussed in greater detail below (pp. 89–93).

⁸ Celsus says, “Next come subjects relating to privy parts [*partes obscenas*], for which the terms employed by the Greeks are the more tolerable, and are now accepted for use, since they are met with in almost every medical hook and discourse. Not even the common use has commended our coarser words [*foediora verba*] for those who would speak with modesty [verecundius]. Hence it is more difficult to set forth these matters and at the same time to observe both propriety [*pudorem*] and the precepts of the art” (*De medicina* 6.18.1 [Spencer, LCL]).

⁹ Pseudo-Aristotle, *Rhetorica ad Alexander* 1441b21: “Guard against describing even his shameful actions with shameful names [*φυλάττου δὲ καὶ τὰς αἰσχρὰς πράξεις μὴ αἰσχροῖς ὀνόμασι λέγειν*]… but indicate such matters allusively, and make the matter clear by using words for other things.”

¹⁰ In Menander’s *Phasma* 39–43, a slave says, “The trouble with you is—well, it makes me think of something rather vulgar, I hope you don’t mind, but everything’s