

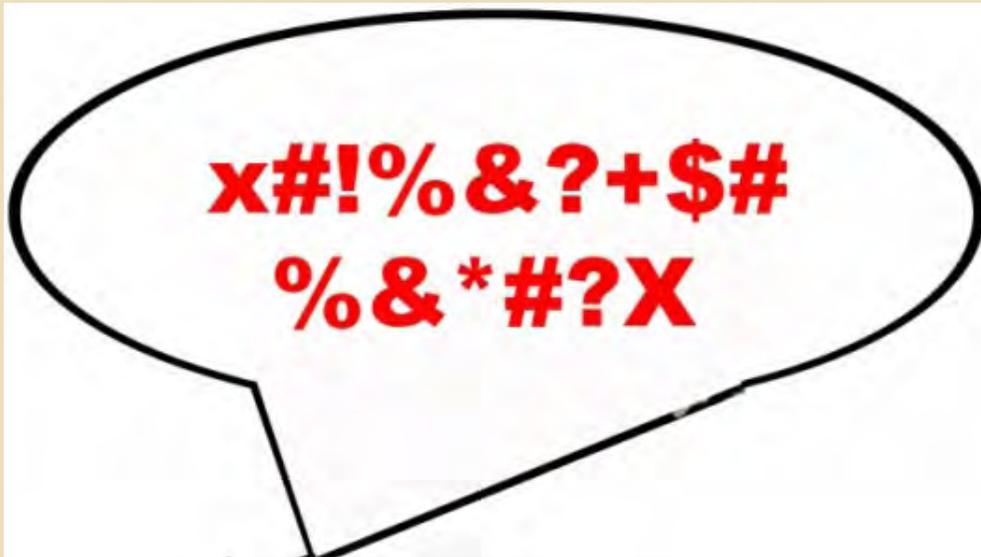
*From Cacemphaton to Cher:*  
Foul Language and Evidence  
in the Rhetorical Tradition

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Swearing, whether of the televised celebrity kind that may draw the ire of the FCC or of the more unpreserved, everyday variety, has been a topic of interest for linguists and anthropologists, for sociologists, historians, and literary critics, for psychologists, biologists, and neurologists, and for legal scholars, business scholars, and pedagogues.<sup>1</sup> And there is, of course, a large popular literature on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Foul language, no longer merely incidental, has become the central topic of not just articles, but entire books and films; it has been legislated, regulated, and even celebrated (at a Swearing Festival in San Francisco).<sup>3</sup> Thus we have the answer to the question posed by Andersson and Trudgill in their 1990 book, *Bad Language*. Their introduction is entitled “Swearing: Who Gives a Damn?”; the answer is, pretty much everyone, from moralists to scholars to practitioners.

Surprisingly, though, there has not been much attention to swearing on the part of rhetoricians. This is the object of the present essay: not swearing itself, but rather its neglect by rhetoricians, and what this neglect reveals about our field of study. Scholars in nearly every field of human inquiry have investigated swearing, foul language, obscene and profane speech: they have studied it in the past and present and in languages and cultures across the globe; they have discovered it to be a rich and varied practice that is not only expressive, but involves persuasive intent and persuasive impact. They have examined swearing in politics, in courts of law, and in ceremonial discourse. In short, they have demonstrated to us that swearing is rhetorical.

Why has everyone else noticed this while crickets chirp in the fields of rhetoric? I’ll argue that we are kept from the juicy topic of swearing by our pedagogical heritage, what David Fleming calls “rhetoric as the study of *speaking and writing well*, a historically prominent and remarkably consistent program of instruction involving both theory and practice and aimed at the moral and intellectual development of the student.”<sup>4</sup> From classical Greece to first-year composition, our disciplinary purpose has been defined in normative and pedagogical terms—in other words, we study not “writing” but “writing *well*,” and “well” is understood at least partly in a moral sense. This is not to suggest that we should abandon our pedagogical heritage, but rather to claim that it limits unnecessarily our field of study.

In a related point, I’ll argue that the neglect of swearing in rhetorical studies today can tell us something about what rhetoric does and doesn’t do well, at least in its current incarnation. In the pages of our journals and in the rhetorical analyses produced by our students, we see fine-grained investigations of nearly every kind of persuasive text. Yet the sophistication of our textual analyses is not matched by a sophisticated understanding of persuasive impact, at least—as in the case with swearing—when the persuasive impact is at odds with established conventions and decorum (“speaking



and writing well” and “moral development”). Our pedagogical heritage blinds us to swearing’s linguistic sophistication and power, and to its persuasive impact; because our most powerful analytical tools focus on the text and we have relatively weak tools to understand persuasive impact, which is extra-textual, we haven’t been able to discover on our own the rhetoricity of swearing, to see foul language as rhetorical.<sup>5</sup>

Once we set aside the prudish mandate to serve as the enforcers of decorum, we see that a simple four-letter word, whether blurted by an exuberant celebrity during a televised awards show or snarled by the Vice President on the Senate floor, offers a rich field of investigation. Cursing can powerfully stage sincerity and spontaneity; it may reveal the ways in which violations of convention are themselves governed by convention. No other rhetorical move is so widespread yet seen as so risky. Both reviled and admired, a profanity has the power simultaneously to shock and win over an auditor; it can divide an audience like no other utterance.



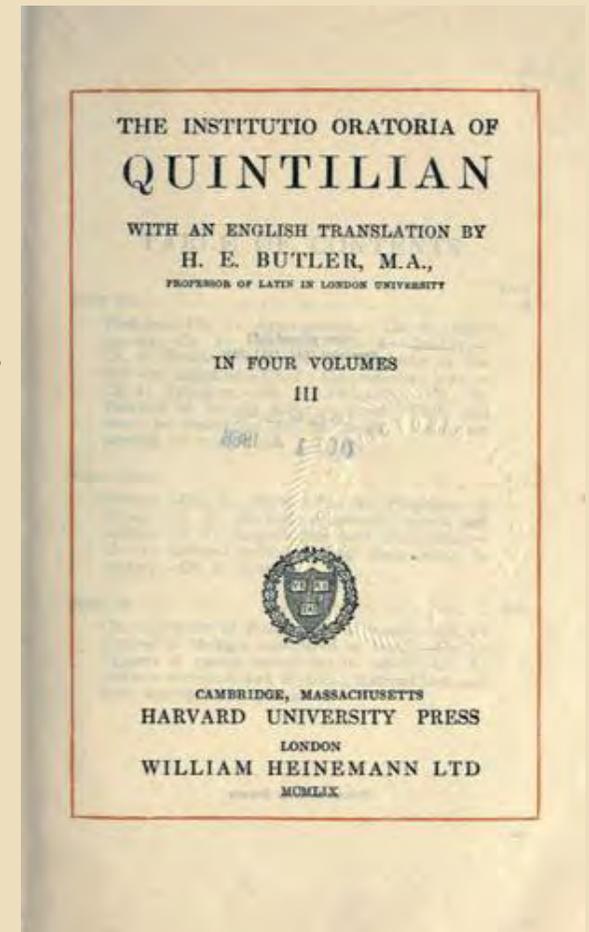
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## Swearing with Rhetorical Intent

My title, “From *Cacamphaton* to Cher,” refers both to the ancient history of the rhetorical tradition (the work of Quintilian and Donatus) and to the ancient history of popular culture (a word uttered during a live television broadcast in 2002). Yet foul language is a perennially contemporary topic. As I write this particular sentence, on April 29, 2011, swearing is in the news again, as it almost unceasingly is. The internet is

abuzz over presidential-run-flirter Donald Trump’s foul language in a Las Vegas speech, and actor Gwyneth Paltrow is being pilloried/applauded for an unflattering characterization of her (deceased) grandmother on a late-night television show. As CNN pundits debate Trump’s intentions and compare his strategic swearing to that of contemporary politicians, the author of a column on the *Daily Mail’s* website raises the question of Paltrow’s rhetorical purpose, arguing that the slur seemed “curiously staged.” The expression, in short, is too odious not to have been planned: “while anything goes in public life these days, the c-word remains hateful. It rings the top bell on the swear-o-meter; it is the baddest of all bad words; it oozes ape-like misogyny.”<sup>6</sup> The mediasphere assumes that Trump and Paltrow swear with rhetorical intent, although in each case the negative assessment of this rhetorical move rests on commentators’ views that the foul language is calculated rather than spontaneous.

This distinction has played a key role in Federal Communications Commission enforcement of prohibitions against foul language. To return to the ancient history (in the pop culture sense) of Cher’s casual “fuck ’em,” uttered during a 2002 music awards ceremony broadcast on the Fox network: this “broadcast indecency,” as the legalese has it,

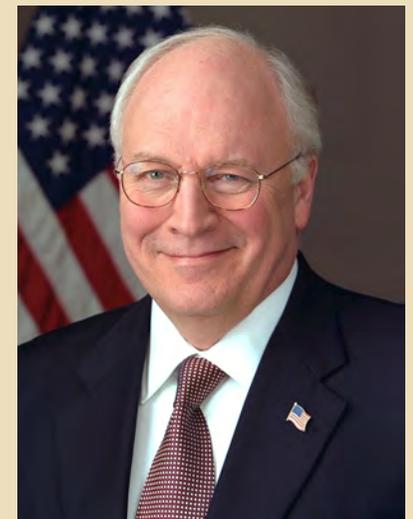


was characterized as “fleeting”—that is, not calculated or planned. Lawyers for the Fox network argued, with occasional but not ultimate success, that it would be impossible to prevent celebrities from swearing during live broadcasts. Justice Scalia, who eventually wrote the 2009 opinion for the US Supreme Court as it ruled against Fox, showed little patience with the “foul-mouthed glitteratae from Hollywood” argument, as he put it.<sup>7</sup> Scalia’s conclusion, although not expressed in these terms, is essentially that even unpremeditated “fleeting indecency” occurs according to subcultural rhetorical conventions (those of a “cultural elite”), and thus does not differ in a substantial way from, for example, the decidedly un-fleeting indecency of comedian George Carlin’s famous sketch “Filthy Words,” about the seven words you can’t say on TV.

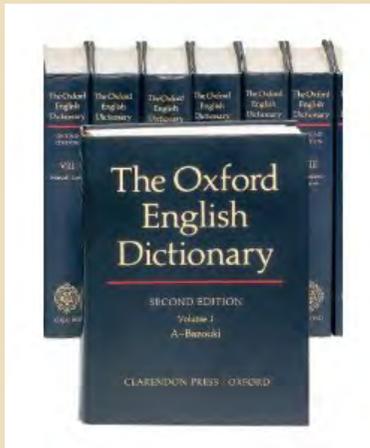


Prior to *FCC v. Fox*, the Court’s last major decision about foul language was in *FCC v. Pacifica* in 1978. A recorded version of Carlin performing his monologue had been broadcast on the radio by the Pacifica network. Opponents of swearing often claim that swearers show a narrowness of vocabulary, but Carlin insists that his monologue had its origin in a love of words. One might even say that each of the major Supreme Court cases involving foul language—for example, *Cohen v. California* (1971), in which a young man successfully defended his right to wear a jacket emblazoned “Fuck the Draft”—involve a love of words and a respect for their power. Tony McEnery, a linguist and author of *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity, and Power from 1586 to the Present*, reminds us that the cycle of concern about swearing fits very nicely with sociologist Stanley Cohen’s theory of “moral panic”: an episode “where the media and society at large fasten on a particular problem and generate an alarmist debate that, in turn, leads to action against the perceived problem [and where the] response to the problem is typically disproportionate to the threat posed” (5).<sup>8</sup>

In addition to a couple of key ingredients (an offensive behavior or object, predictions of dire consequences, proposed corrective actions), a moral panic involves a certain cast of characters, the most important of which are the scapegoat (which might be an individual or a group, or both) and the moral entrepreneur—in this case, the Bush Administration’s FCC, whose ramped up enforcement of broadcast indecency included Gore-ally Bono’s “fucking brilliant,” uttered during an awards ceremony broadcast in 2003. Former Vice President Cheney, was, in a peripheral way, a part of the swearing debate of the period: also in 2004, Mr. Cheney famously uttered the words “go fuck yourself” during a conversation with Senator Patrick Leahy on the floor of the US Senate—or I should say, he closed the conversation with this phrase; as the *Washington Post* put it, “the exchange ended when Mr. Cheney offered some crass advice.”<sup>9</sup> When Mr. Cheney dropped the F-bomb, he offered to his political opponents the opportunity to play the moral entrepreneur’s role, a role that they seemed to play as eagerly and as hypocritically as he and his associates had played and continue to play.



My purpose, though, is not to plumb the political stakes of the discussion on swearing, and I'm steering clear of a related issue in taboo speech, that of slurs or hate speech. This is the topic of attorney Richard Dooling's 1996 book *Blue Streak*, which conflates the famous dictum of Lenny Bruce ("if you can't say fuck, you can't say fuck the government") with the emergence of concern about "hate speech" in the 1990s, putting Bruce in the service of a right-wing critique of "political correctness."<sup>10</sup> This historical migration of taboos is widely treated in the literature on swearing: the blasphemy in the pre- and early modern days is largely powerless now, the profanity of sexually charged terms much diminished, while the slurs of hate speech are highly charged (Paltrow's characterization of her grandmother unites the latter two categories).<sup>11</sup> What interests me most, and what I believe should interest more rhetoricians, is this middle category, ubiquitous but still taboo, the traditional "bad" words, the four-letter words (many of them enumerated by Carlin in his famous bit) which are among the oldest words in English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and which, the linguists tell us, are also the most grammatically versatile words in the English language.<sup>12</sup>



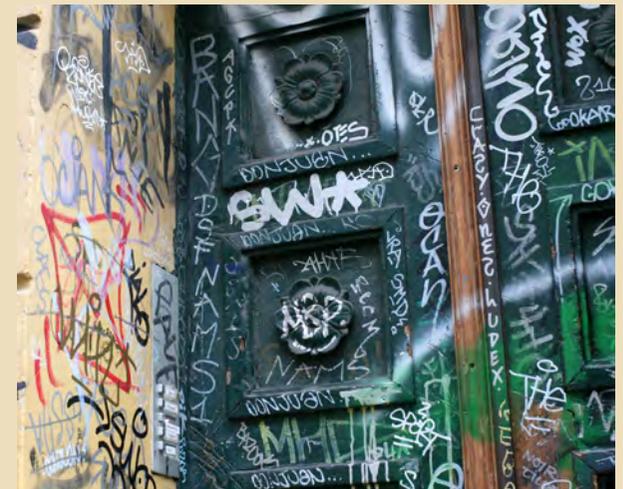
## Foul Language and Composition-Rhetoric

Years ago, I had a friend who would come over to my house and embarrass me by looking up these words in my compact edition of the *OED*, whose entries spare no detail, enumerating in tiny type the many, many possibilities of the most versatile swear words. In fact, the Editor-at-Large of the *OED* for North America, Jesse Sheidlower, made waves not long ago when he published an entire volume of variations on a single word—the title of the book is *The F Word*, now in its third edition. While my friend had to rely on my compact print edition of the *OED* and its handy magnifying glass, the internet now permits us the infinitely greater pleasure of typing those words into not only the online edition of the *OED*, but also into scholarly databases. Try it, you'll be surprised at the results.

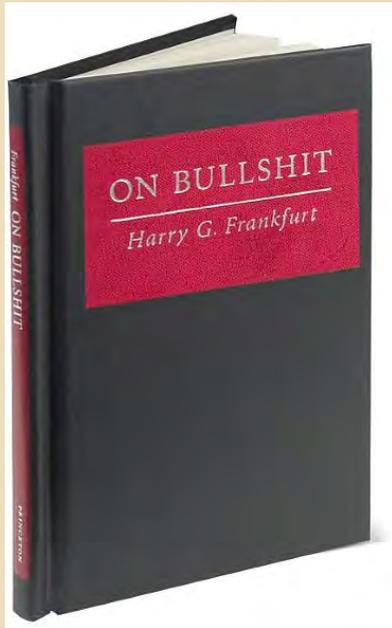
It was precisely this activity, typing the "seven words you can't say on tv" into the search boxes of scholarly databases, that revealed to me the extent and depth of scholarship on this topic. (It also revealed to me the extensive publication record of Dr. Reinhardt Adolfo Fuck,

a distinguished geologist specializing in petrology at the University of Brasilia.) Swearing is truly an interdisciplinary field, but as I've mentioned, rhetoricians haven't had much to say on the topic of foul language. We do have the tools to study swearing. There have been rhetorical studies of other kinds of prescribed or taboo expression; graffiti, for example, although even that is relatively under-examined. John Schilb has given us the valuable concept of the "rhetorical refusal," a surprising or even outrageous departure from rhetorical conventions or norms, although he attends to the traditional objects of rhetorical study.<sup>13</sup> Rhetoricians haven't looked too hard at swearing (except, like most folks, to condemn it).

The broader field of Composition and Rhetoric has sometimes delved into bad language, as evidenced by a recent issue of *College Composition and Communication*, the lead article of which is entitled "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing."



This essay follows in the tradition of a 1976 *College English* essay entitled “Freshman Comp: What Is This Shit?”<sup>14</sup> But in these and many other such articles, the focus of the analysis is not the word itself, its rhetorical purpose or impact, but rather the *concept* of bullshit and its unfortunate proximity to our professional lives. Here, we have proof that our field can use foul language to rhetorical effect without investigating swearing as rhetoric; additionally, foul language is not scrutinized by our profession but is instead used to characterize it.<sup>15</sup>



The concept of bullshit, rather than its rhetorical power, is also the topic of philosopher Harry Frankfurt’s popular 2005 volume *On Bullshit*, which observes in its opening sentence that “one of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit.”<sup>16</sup> Again, the concern here is not with foul language *per se* (often associated with frank, direct, or impolitic communication) but with the discourse denoted by the impolite term: jargon, obfuscation, and manipulation.

The field of rhetoric is, of course, very interested in distinguishing itself from this kind of bullshit, subjecting it to an anxious apotropaic gesture of disavowal. Rhetoricians never tire of decrying the fact that in popular usage, the term “rhetoric” is basically a synonym for “bullshit.” In his last book, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, Wayne Booth includes this term in a long list of terms commonly used as synonyms of rhetoric: “propaganda, bombast, jargon, gibberish, rant, guff, twaddle, grandiloquence, [...] sleaze, crud, bullshit, ranting, [...] palaver, fluff, prattle, [...] harangue, tirade, verbiage, balderdash, [...] nonsense [...]” and so.<sup>17</sup> Booth is actually among the few rhetoricians who admit that bullshit is part of rhetoric, as I’ll discuss later. But again, what’s at stake here is the concept—the question of the relation of language and communication to knowledge and truth, as well as the question of rhetoric’s disciplinary status—not the status of the word itself, or of other words like it.

## Rhetorics Big and Little

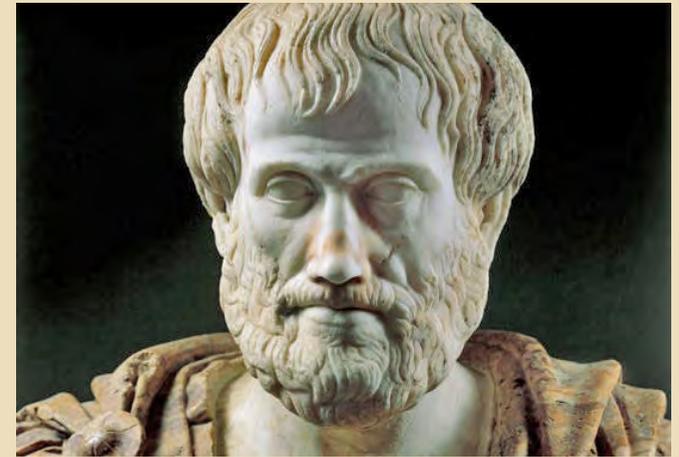
We know very well that in definitions of rhetoric there is usually a tension between the broad and narrow versions: Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “a faculty of considering all the possible means of persuasion on every subject”<sup>18</sup> has opened out into some very broad formulations, such as Andrea Lunsford’s claim that rhetoric is “the art, practice, and study of human communication.” These broader or more spacious formulations are sometimes gathered under the heading “Big Rhetoric,” which Edward Schiappa characterizes as “the theoretical position that everything, or virtually everything, can be described as ‘rhetorical.’” In other words, any object, event, or action may be subject to a rhetorical analysis; rhetorical analysis is not limited to formal orations (as in classical models), to intentional speech, or even to language.<sup>19</sup>

The narrower view is traced to the classical tradition, represented by figures such as Aristotle and Quintilian, the Roman rhetorician who was particularly concerned with rhetoric as pedagogical. S. Michael Halloran has observed that Quintilian’s goal was not *interpretive*, as is often the case with the rhetorical analysis practiced under the heading of Big Rhetoric (nor was Aristotle’s, for that matter). Instead, or rather, *in addition*, the rhetoricians of antiquity aimed at “prepar[ing] others to speak in conformity with

established conventions.”<sup>20</sup> There’s a specific pedagogical goal here: rhetorical analysis is always conducted in the service of instruction in communication in a limited set of public contexts. The phrase most famously associated with Quintilian’s rhetoric is, of course, “the good man speaking well”; rhetoric here is aimed at preparing an elite to act responsibly in a civic arena.<sup>21</sup>

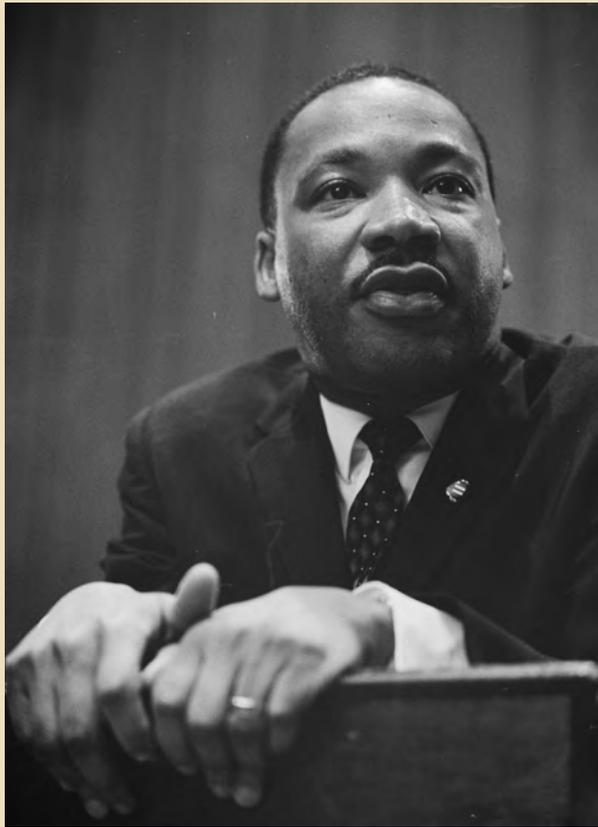


As an aside, Quintilian had a few things to say about bad language. On the one hand, he was less prudish than some commentators today, arguing that the rhetorical education of his time “suffers from a ridiculous fastidiousness about words, and has excluded from its language a great portion of the Latin tongue.” On the other hand, he borrows the Greek word *cacemphaton* to describe offensive language (“ill-sounding” or “foul-sounding”), arguing that speakers must avoid words and sounds that give “offense to modesty.”<sup>22</sup> He describes these words and sounds with terms such as “indecent,” “corrupt,” “unseemly,” “unbecoming,” “objectionable,” and “obscene.” Sadly for etymologists and lexicographers, Quintilian doesn’t go into much detail. Unlike Carlin (and unlike the US Supreme Court opinion in *FCC v. Pacifica*, which includes a full transcript of Carlin’s monologue), Quintilian declines to specify exactly which words he means: he writes that “it would be tedious to specify them, and, in doing so, I should dwell upon the fault which I say should be avoided.”<sup>23</sup> Yet Quintilian does mention one example of *cacemphaton*, an extremely amusing example, I think, practically straight out of *Monty Python*. He recommends that orators avoid the nominative form of the Latin word for “interruption,” *intercapidinis*, because the last two syllables of this form, *intercapedo*, are the same as the word *pedo*, which is Latin for “fart.”<sup>24</sup>



“Fart,” of course, is one of those four-letter words that have been a part of the English language for a very long time—longer, in fact, than either fuck or shit. But in Geoffrey Hughes’s calculation, fart is less offensive than these two, because “the dominant factors in making terms [...] highly charged are their degree of solidity and their proximity to the genital/anal area.”<sup>25</sup> Strangely, this analysis leads Hughes to regard “turd” as highly offensive; Carlin, for his part, observes that “you can say turd, but who would want to?” Since the Carlin days, the Court has defined indecent speech as “language that describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium, sexual or excretory activities or organs, at times of the day when there is a reasonable risk that children may be in the audience.”<sup>26</sup> Although “fart” has a high degree of proximity to the genital/anal region, it denotes a very low degree of solidity, which perhaps saves it, in the Court’s eyes, from being an “excretory activity.”

But to return to Quintilian's view of rhetoric as a pedagogy of civic communication: this version of rhetoric substantially limits its scope, or what we might call "the rhetorical situation" (as Lloyd Bitzer put it in his famous 1968 article). Bitzer defines rhetorical discourse somewhat narrowly: for him, rhetoric is a mode of making an intentional impact through persuasive discourse. He specifically excludes poetic and scientific discourse, because although these may be addressed to audiences (like rhetoric), they are not aimed at getting the audience to act in a certain way. We often erroneously view the "expansion" of rhetoric as a chronological development, subsequent to Bitzer's essay, but this is clearly not the case. For example, Martin Steinmann, writing in *College English* in 1966, argued that "successful persuasion is only one sort of rhetorical effectiveness; successful communication of knowledge, for example, is another sort, perhaps the most important."<sup>27</sup>



Rhetorical discourse of the narrower sort, for Bitzer, comes into being or is called into being by an *exigence*, which he describes as "an imperfection marked by an urgency; [...] a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be."<sup>28</sup> In the face of this defect or obstacle, "The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes a mediator of change."<sup>29</sup> Altering reality by means other than discourse is not a rhetorical action; discourse that does not alter reality via an audience as a "mediator of change" is not rhetorical. In this narrower version of rhetoric, the rhetorician or student of rhetoric focuses on analysis of successful or unsuccessful examples of persuasive speech, generally intentionally persuasive speech. As an example, I cite the reams of scholarship devoted to presidential rhetoric or King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The goals of this activity include training students to make an impact on audiences, and strengthening students' resistance to the rhetoric of others.

On the face of it, either version of rhetoric would permit or even compel the study of swearing, although the narrower, Bitzerian version would exclude many cases, such as those of Carlin, Cheney, and Cher. Carlin, although he provides a pretty thoughtful and even insightful analysis of the social functions of offensive speech, and although there's considerable evidence that he had conscious political motives in doing so, was acting essentially as an entertainer, not as a *rhetor* in the narrow sense. Cheney, similarly, was not attempting to persuade Patrick Leahy to soften his critique of a corruption scandal involving Halliburton, a defense contractor with close ties to the former Vice President. In Bitzer's model, Cheney's utterance—like those of the "foul-mouthed Hollywood glitteratae"—was not persuasive but merely expressive, an intensifier.

The “big rhetorician” might study the function and meaning of George Carlin’s or Dick Cheney’s enunciation of four-letter words as any other scholar of language might: they fall within the realm of human communication. For example, the semiotician might see the oath as not an intensifier but a signifier, signifying depth of feeling, firmness of purpose, or frankness of expression. In fact, in the broader field(s) of English Studies, calls to study “indecent speech” in this way date back at least to linguist Allen Read’s 1934 essay in *American Speech*, “An Obscenity Symbol.” Read observes that “a sociologist does not refuse to study certain criminals on the ground that they are too perverted or too dastardly; surely a student of language is even less warranted in refusing to consider certain four-letter words because they are too ‘nasty’ or too ‘dirty.’”<sup>30</sup>



## Swearing, Evidence, and Rhetorical Analysis

My main point, however, is that neither of these models of rhetoric has looked very closely at swearing, and I think there are two reasons. First, “big” rhetoric and the narrower version share the implicit normativity or prescriptiveness of a pedagogical model, dating back at least to Aristotle’s admonition in the *Politics* that “the young especially should never be allowed to repeat or hear anything of [indecent speech].”<sup>31</sup> In a telling phrase, Wayne Booth argues for a broad understanding of rhetoric by defining it as including both “the visual and verbal garbage flooding our lives and the tools for cleaning things up.”<sup>32</sup> In this view, swearing, although in some cases it may function as an antidote to the “verbal garbage” of bullshit, is defined *a priori* as “bad language” and hence left out of the rhetorical curriculum; it must be “cleaned up.” Second, both versions of rhetoric lack the tools for measuring impact, relying almost exclusively on textual analysis (or in some advanced cases, intertextual analysis). In our classes, for example, we conduct ourselves much as Quintilian did, preparing students to communicate within established

conventions, and hence we would counsel them that the use of profanity is frowned upon in academic writing—but beyond our general impression of “convention,” we have few or no tools to measure impact on audiences.

This is why I think the field of rhetoric might have something to learn from some empirical models found in the social sciences (as a scholar trained in the humanities, I never thought I would make such a claim). These fields may have tools which we might borrow; or rather, when they study rhetorical problems, such as swearing, we might borrow their results. Simply put, to live up to its promise as “the art, practice, and study of human communication,” rhetoric needs to move beyond an approach focused mainly on textual analysis, and to think more carefully about its moralisms (as Wayne Booth attempts, with mixed success, in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*).

As an alternative, I’m going to point a few examples, a few recent studies that try to develop approaches to looking at swearing as persuasive. These studies approach persuasion from a range of disciplinary perspectives, and offer findings about foul language that would surprise a rhetorician. The first example might be familiar to people working in literature and popular culture, as it got some news



coverage and was popularized in Dennis Baron's blog *The Web of Language*: an article by Yehuda Baruch and Stuart Jenkins entitled "Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-Social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable." This essay appeared in the *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, and its authors are social scientists in the Norwich School for Business at the University of East Anglia, so I'm not sure exactly what to call them in a disciplinary sense. Are they scholars of business? Management scientists? In any case, this is an attitudinal and behavioral study that concludes that under certain circumstances, certain forms of swearing can create "a sense of community and [reinforce] social relationships."<sup>33</sup> Neo-Aristotelians might call this an appeal to *pathos*, that is, a form of argument building on a shared sense of community values.

Other studies seem to confirm these findings, such as a 2006 paper in the journal *Social Influence*, "Indecent Influence: The Positive Effects of Obscenity on Persuasion." This study tested the impact of moderate foul language by having people listen to one of three versions of a speech. In one

version, the word "damn" appeared in the beginning of the speech; in another, at the end; in the third, not at all. The strange result was that, while there was no effect on speaker credibility, the appearance of the word *damn* "significantly increased" the persuasiveness of the speech, as well as the perceived "intensity" of the speaker.<sup>34</sup> In the Aristotelian model, these sociologists are focusing on *ethos*, arguments that persuade on the basis of the speaker's credibility. However, by analyzing reactions to a text, rather than the text itself, they are able to produce actual evidence of impact, which traditional rhetorical analysis does not do.

A caveat, though: swearing specialists, such as Geoffrey Hughes, would disagree with classifying "damn" as an *obscene* word; for Hughes, it's more of a blasphemous oath. In the long view, Hughes argues, the history of swearing shows a trend away from swearing *by* (with explicit or implicit reference to a god or religion, as in "damn" or the minced oaths "drat" or "blimey"), and toward swearing *at*, which is where we see that "the 'lower' physical faculties of copulation, defecation and urination have come very much to the fore."<sup>35</sup> Instead of an oath invoking the mysterious and powerful forces of religion and the supernatural, we tend today to invoke the mysterious and powerful forces of sexual and social taboos; of Carlin's seven words, none are blasphemous. In short, "damn," the word used in this study, has lost most of its taboo (hence, perhaps, the low impact on credibility) but retains an ability to have an impact on persuasion.

Some studies have gone further in examining the potential gap between self-reported persuasion and actual persuasiveness—that is to say, I may report that I am not affected by an argument, but my behavior may actually change. This is a study, or rather, a synthesis of three studies, conducted in the Netherlands; it appeared in 2005 in the journal *Psychology, Crime, and the Law*. At issue was the relationship between swearing and perceived credibility in legal testimony. The interesting twist here is that the study not only examined participants' reaction to swearing, but also their attitudes about it: in an initial study, respondents were asked whether they believed swearing "to be a sign of credibility, a sign of deceit, or neither" -- generally, "people self-reported to find swearwords a sign of deceit"

(Rassin and Van Der Heijden). However, in a second set of studies, similar to the aforementioned “damn” study, participants were asked to rate the credibility of several examples of fictitious testimony.<sup>36</sup> The methodology is similar to Scherer and Sagarin’s “damn” study: one group read examples of testimony with swear words, another group read the same testimony without swear words. The key feature in the study is that, contrary to their self-reported view of swearing, subjects found the testimony *with* swearing was to be more credible than the “clean” testimony (remember that in Scherer and Sagarin, there was no apparent impact on credibility).



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Traditional rhetorical analysis has a hard time producing this kind of evidence. Traditional, or what we might call “current-traditional” rhetorical analysis focuses dominantly or exclusively on a single textual object, the discourse of the rhetor (e.g. an inaugural address or “Letter from Birmingham Jail”). “Bigger” versions of rhetorical analysis include intertextuality, non-traditional rhetorical texts (such as scientific reports), and visual texts, but rely nonetheless mainly on the perceptions of the rhetorical analyst or critic alone. Rhetorical analysis thus too often becomes a methodology of close reading: at stake is the acumen of the critic in the face of the text, measured against some implicit or explicit norm or theory.<sup>37</sup> First-year writing courses in American higher education often include a rhetorical analysis on the close reading model: the text itself is the object of analysis, a brief summary of the Aristotelian rhetorical triangle serving as the theory.

Much of our most rewarding rhetorical research follows this model: the internal workings of the discourse of the rhetor are scrutinized—the logic, the structure, the turns of phrase; this textual evidence is measured against some critical or theoretical model, often from the classical rhetorical tradition. An example relevant to the topic of swearing is Nancy Johnson’s recent analysis of actor Christian Bale’s apology for a notorious profane tirade. In keeping with the apparent taboo on rhetorical analysis of swearing itself, Johnson leaves aside the tirade and focuses closely on the transcript of the apology itself, and it is from this transcript that the largest portion of her evidence is drawn. She measures this evidence not with a classical source, but instead with William Benoit’s illuminating book *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies* (SUNY Press, 1995). Johnson’s analysis of Bale’s apology relies almost entirely on textual evidence, either from Bale (the primary text) or from Benoit (the theoretical model), and it is largely on the basis of this evidence that Johnson judges Bale’s apology “successful.”<sup>38</sup> Brief references to some intertextual evidence (reactions of pundits) or extra-textual evidence (Bale’s subsequent Oscar) serve to confirm the textual analysis.

The point here is this: rhetorical analysis, even when practiced in the richest way, tends to be light on evidence about the most important aspect of rhetoric: its actual impact on audiences. Johnson, unlike many rhetoricians, acknowledges that her evidence is “textual” and that “the only way to quantify whether or not Bale’s apology was successful would be to poll the audience. To my knowledge,

this has not been done.”<sup>39</sup> But as indicated by the psychology research I’ve mentioned above, textual and inter-textual evidence cannot be taken at face value: what is stated about persuasion is not the same as persuasion itself. Even a poll of the audience cannot be taken at face value: Scherer and Sagarin remind us that such evidence, because it is self-reported, may be misleading—or, to reframe this idea from the perspective of the rhetorician, even a response to a poll is rhetorical: it involves a stance, a projection of an image of the self in relation to a real, imagined, or invoked audience.



To be clear, I am not recommending that rhetoricians abandon textual analysis and, like social scientists, use texts only as a way of delivering variables to control groups and experimental groups. The studies I’ve mentioned have all the limitations of empirical studies. One limitation is that not everything can be measured or should be measured. For example, Aristotle’s concern about the effect of indecent speech on children is repudiated by Allen Read: “The moralists who convince themselves that they are saving children from wickedness are in reality ensuring that the minds of the young will develop into the same welter of obscurantistic obsessions as their own.”<sup>40</sup> Justice Scalia, in *FCC v. Fox*, admits that this point is perhaps debatable, but observes that it would be impossible to resolve the debate with empirical study: “There are some propositions for which scant empirical evidence can be marshaled, and the harmful effect of broadcast profanity on children is one of them. One cannot demand a multiyear controlled study, in which some children are intentionally exposed to indecent broadcasts (and insulated from all other indecency), and others are shielded from all indecency.” Thus I do not offer these kinds of empirical studies as a panacea or as some kind of unmitigated scientific truth.



Again, I do not argue that we abandon of rhetorical analysis and rhetorical criticism, or that we throw in the towel of interpretation. But I do think that rhetorical analysis has been making unwarranted claims about persuasion. Knowledge of the methods and discoveries of other fields could strengthen our understanding of this core concept, and open up rich new areas of inquiry that heretofore have been taboo. Thus I offer these studies instead as gestures toward a new kind of inquiry or discovery about communication behaviors—new to us, at least. The example of *cacemphaton*, of foul language or inappropriate speech, indicates that textual evidence is not always what it seems; our pedagogical bent, our theoretical models and our normative frameworks may mislead us, like the study subjects who disapproved of swearing but unconsciously found it persuasive. In short, the testimony of unnamed “English professors” cited in a 1973 foul language case—that “it shows lack of judgment to use four-letter words to any group of people”—is falsifiable.<sup>41</sup> If we discard this moralism (at least as scholars), we will discover rich new fields of study, “outlaw” rhetorics that can’t be evaluated with the yardstick of our own

sense of decorum. And these new fields of study, such as swearing, profanity, and other forms of taboo speech, will reveal that rhetorical practice and pedagogy today must not limit themselves to textual evidence and theoretical approaches—these will tend to obscure, and not to reveal, the actual impact of discourse. In short, it's time for rhetoric to give a [insert expletive of choice here].

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>B.A. Taylor, "Towards a Structural and Lexical Analysis of 'Swearing' and the Language of Abuse in Australian English," *Linguistics* 13 (1975): 17-44; Allen Walker Read, "An Obscenity Symbol," *American Speech* 9.4 (Dec. 1934): 264-278; Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," in Eric H. Lenneberg, ed. *New Directions in the Study of Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 24-25; Tony McEnery, *Swearing in English: Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present*, (London: Routledge, 2006); John C. Burnham, *Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History* (New York: New York UP, 1993); Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Robert Graves, *Lars Porsena; or, The Future of Swearing and Improper Language* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1927); Timothy Jay and Kristin Janschewitz, "The Pragmatics of Swearing," *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* 4.2 (July 2008): 267-288; D. Van Lancker, and J.L. Cummings, "Expletives: Neurolinguistic and Neurobehavioral Perspectives on Swearing," *Brain Research Reviews* 31 (1999): 83-104; Richard Dooling, *Blue Streak: Swearing, Free Speech, and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Random House, 1996); Christopher M. Fairman, "Fuck," *Cardozo Law Review* 28.4 (2007): 1711-1772.

<sup>2</sup>Lars-Gunnar Andersson Peter Trudgill, *Bad Language* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990); Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Steven Pinker, *The Seven Words You Can't Say on Television* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Bill Bryson, *"Swearing" in The Mother Tongue: English and How It Got That Way* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Steve Anderson *Fuck: A Documentary* (Bad Apple Films/Thinkfilm, 2005); Jesse Sheidlower, *The F Word* (New York: Random House, 1995); Fairman, "Fuck"; Edward Champion, "Well, Fuck Me: The Swearing Festival Report." *Edward Champion's Return of the Reluctant*. 20 February 2006. <http://www.edrants.com/?p=2786>; Reyhan Harmanci, "Out Loud: Bleep, Bleep, B\*&@#!" San Francisco Chronicle/SFGate.com (16 February 2006).

<sup>4</sup>David Fleming, "Rhetoric as a Course of Study," *College English* 61.2 (Nov. 1998): 169-191. Italics in original.

<sup>5</sup>Although it isn't possible to pursue in the present study, I would argue that this is also true in the case of other "outlaw" rhetorics, such as graffiti.

<sup>6</sup>Jan Moir, "Gwyneth, I Swear You're an Old Phoney," *Mail Online*, April 29, 2011, accessed April 29, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1381704/Gwyneth-I-swear-youre-old-phoney.html>; see also Gabriella Schwartz, "Trump's F-Bomb Tirade," *CNN*, April 29, 2011, accessed April 29, 2011, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/04/29/trumps-f-bomb-tirade>.

<sup>7</sup>Federal Communications Commission v. Fox Television Stations, Inc. 129 S. Ct. 1800. Supreme Ct. of the US. 2009

<sup>8</sup>*Cohen v. California*. 403 U.S. 15. Supreme Ct. of the US. 7 June 1971; Stanley Cohen *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002); McEnery, *Swearing in English*, 5.

<sup>9</sup>Helen Dewar and Dana Milbank. "Cheney Dismisses Critic with Obscenity." *The Washington Post* (25 June 2004): A04.

<sup>10</sup>Dooling, *Blue Streak*, 37.

<sup>11</sup>McEnery, *Swearing in English*; also Hughes, *Swearing*.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *Swearing*.

<sup>13</sup> John Schilb, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audience Expectations* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Philip Eubanks and John D. Schaeffer, "A Kind Word for Bullshit: The Problem of Academic Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 59.3 (2008): 372-388; David R. Pichaske, "Freshman Comp: What Is This Shit?" *College English* 38.2 (1976): 117-124.

<sup>15</sup> Remember Richard Lanham's aside in his discussion of composition textbooks in his 1974 jeremiad *Style: An Anti-Textbook*. After compiling a list of the Polonius-like and contradictory commands found in an array of writing handbooks, Lanham, with casual sexism, opines that "a student, if he is on a scholarship or has an ambitious mother, may actually try to earn all these merit badges. But if he has any spirit, he'll murmur a well-chosen four-letter word and go out and get stoned" (15).

<sup>16</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Treatise on Rhetoric* 1.2.1355b (London: H.G. Bohn, 1847). I quote this edition rather than the more commonly cited W. Rhys Roberts translation of 1924 because it renders Aristotle's word *θεωρησαι* as the more active "considering" rather than "observing."

<sup>19</sup> Andrea A. Lunsford, "Rhetoric and Composition," in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, 2d edition, ed. Joseph Gibaldi (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992): 77-100; Edward Schiappa, "Second Thoughts on the Critiques of Big Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34.3 (2001): 260.

<sup>20</sup> S. Michael Halloran, "Tradition and Theory in Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 231-41.

<sup>21</sup> David Fleming, cited earlier, argues that the pedagogical tradition is a "third way" between the proponents of narrowly defined rhetoric on the classical model and "big" rhetoric. I must sidestep this argument; for my purposes, the pedagogical tradition has its roots in the classical era and persists today as the (big) "rhetoric" in "composition and rhetoric."

<sup>22</sup> According to James Murphy, the ancient rhetorician Donatus, in his *Barbarismus* (c. 350 CE), lists "cacemphaton" as one of the "twelve vices of diction." James Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974): 33.

<sup>23</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 8.3.46

<sup>24</sup> Gideon Burton, *Silva Rhetoricae: The Forest of Rhetoric*. <http://rhetoric.byu.edu>. November 1, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *Swearing*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> *Federal Communications Commission v. Pacifica Foundation et al.* 438 U.S. 726. Supreme Ct. of the US. 3 July 1978

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1.1 (1968); Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Rhetorical Research," *College English* 24.4 (Jan. 1966): 281.

<sup>28</sup> Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Read, "An Obscenity Symbol," 264. Read's plea for serious attention to swearing, I've discovered, gets echoed in subsequent scholarship. Forty years after Read's essay, in 1975, linguist B.A. Taylor laments that "where attempts have been made to analyze [swearing], these have been undertaken rather in a spirit of fun than as regular serious pieces of linguistic research." More recently, another psychologist, Timothy Jay, argues that "a negative dismissive attitude toward swearing is in part responsible for why mainstream psychology has ignored swearing as a research topic." Taylor, "Towards a Structural and Lexical Analysis of 'Swearing' and the Language

of Abuse in Australian English,” 17; Timothy Jay, “The Utility and Ubiquity of Taboo Words,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 4.2 (2009): 158.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle *Politics* 7.17

<sup>32</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Dennis Baron, “WTF? Swearing at Work Is Good for Business” *The Web of Language*. 22 Oct. 2007. <http://illinois.edu/db/view/25>. Yehuda Barch and Stuart Jenkins, “Swearing at Work and Permissive Leadership Culture: When Anti-Social Becomes Social and Incivility Is Acceptable,” *Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 28 (2007).

<sup>34</sup> Cory R. Scherer and Brad J. Sagarin. “Indecent Influence: The Positive Effects of Obscenity on Persuasion,” *Social Influence* 1.2 (June 2006).

<sup>35</sup> Hughes, *Swearing*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Rassin and Simone Van Der Heijden. “Appearing Credible? Swearing Helps!” *Psychology, Crime, and the Law* 11.2 (June 2005).

<sup>37</sup> For a warm and accessible treatment of close reading as a practice, see Andrew DuBois, “Close Reading: An Introduction” in *Close Reading*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Nancy Johnson, “Christian Bale’s Account of a Profane Tirade: Salvation or ‘Bale-out?’” *Relevant Rhetoric* 1.2 (2011), 9.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, “Christian Bale’s Account,” 9.

<sup>40</sup> Read, “Obscenity Symbol,” 17.

<sup>41</sup> Fairman, “Fuck,” 1769.