

BITING TONGUES

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*(With apologies to Saint Thomas Aquinas, William Shakespeare,
and the history of Norman England.)*



WILLIAM the First of England, more familiar to the student of history as "William the Conqueror," was a bastard. Matilda, his Queen, was aware of the fact and used often to remind him of it. It seems that she did this once too often. Her irate husband gave orders for a punishment decidedly unbecoming her station. The lady was ordered to be dragged by the hair of her head until such time, it may be supposed, as she should recognize that her husband, although of illegitimate origin, was now her lord and master in very deed.

Whether the incident be true in whole or in part or merely reflects the heroic efforts of a professor of history to maintain the interest of an afternoon class is of no special moment. As it stands, this momentary glimpse into the private life of a king who was also quite obviously a conqueror affords an excellent illustration of the vice of contumely.¹ Here and in an explicit manner are contained all the elements that go to make up the theological consideration of that rather brave but foolhardy thrust at Justice—the contumelious act. To make these elements more explicit, and that against a background of eleventh-century England, will be the happy burden of this paper.

The scene of the particular "royal incident" above related is one of the great halls of the king's castle. Matilda's request for a new supply of head-dresses with accompanying veils has been flatly refused by William. The king, it would seem, is just a bit "out of countenance." (Perhaps he has been rather hard put to it lately to live up to his nick-name.) At any rate, Matilda loses her temper and thus very conveniently supplies the modern sleuth with his "motive" and the equally inquisitive moral theologian with the "cause" of whatever may ensue.

Naturally enough there is not long to wait. Matilda rains down a storm of angry abuse upon the royal head of her spouse. To top it off, and rather like the more modern shrew's ". . . and besides

¹ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 72

... she again twits him about his bastardy. Her contumelious treatment of her lord has always been verbal because more effective. Very probably the idea of manifesting her contempt for the honor of William by external actions has never occurred to Matilda. The more simple expedient of a "curtain lecture" has always appealed to her feminine and therefore more practical mind.

The analysis of a moral act must perforce consume more time than the act itself.

While his lady proceeds from anger over the refusal of her request to the contumelious act couched in abusive language, William is by no means mentally idle. As has been indicated, the king is in no mood for a domestic skirmish. (Perhaps it might have been the coffee, or whatever the Norman kings used for a stimulant, that was too long acoming on that particular morning.) He reminds himself of the countless number of times when he has borne patiently the old insult (for he was, according to history, a good and faithful husband). Now, however, something must be done. Honor is his due as king and as "the head of his wife." If the first should fail in time he must be able to fall back upon the second. He must make an end of this rather uncomfortable penchant of his wife, both for her own good and that of the people of his realm. Who could tell but that some day she might openly disgrace him? And so it is that quite stolidly he summons several attendants and issues his order.

That the Conqueror was not justified in his procedure may perhaps be the contention of the feminists. William, however, was made of sterner stuff as also was Saint Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. The king had borne patiently the insults to his honor until it was his duty to "speak out loud and bold" and restrain the offender—even though she happened to be his Queen.

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.²

The above words lose naught of their truth from the fact that they were spoken by Iago, consummate villian of Shakespearean literature. The sly ancient of Othello had no more intention of moralizing when he spoke them than had Caiaphas the faintest notion of prophesying when he announced of Christ that "it is expedient for you that one

² Shakespeare, William, *Othello*, Act III, Scene 3.

man should die for the people." Iago, his honeyed words of foulest villainy and the tragic outcome, may well serve as an object lesson in the theology of the vice of detraction.³

Iago is, of course, the prince of detractors about whose neck the normal theatre-goer would himself like to place the noose. Were the play to be changed and his machinations deleted it would lose its force and no little of its meaning. For it is the subtle suggestions of this same Iago, directed against the good names of Desdemona and Cassio that arouse the awful jealousy of Othello and bring about the tragic dénouement.

It is of the very purpose of Art to exert an influence upon men, whether for good or for evil. Since he had little knowledge of the complexes and inhibitions of the Freudians, Shakespeare never thought to present Iago as the hero of his tragedy. If there be a hero—and that is a question—Othello would seem to be the man since he holds the sympathy of the audience. However, his crime is far graver than that of his ancient. Iago's sin is one of detraction. Othello's is that of murder, induced, it is true, by his insane jealousy, but also by his willingness to become a participant in the detraction of his wife.

To sum up with the verdict against the three offenders. They have but two things in common; their sins are mortal and directed against the good of others. Othello committed murder and was, as a consequence, guilty of the greatest crime. Matilda sinned against the honor of her husband and is second in the line of infamy. Iago, guilty of detraction, can conceal himself behind the others. To the feminist and the lover of Shakespearean drama and to whomsoever else may be concerned let it be said that morals transcend mere private judgment. And the judgments of God upon men have a way of being far more subtle than the veiled infamies of Iago.

³ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 73.