



# Forbidden Words

Taboo and the Censoring of Language

Keith Allan and Kate Burridge



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## Forbidden Words

Many words and expressions are viewed as 'taboo', such as those used to describe sex, our bodies and their functions, and those used to insult other people. This book provides a fascinating insight into taboo language and its role in everyday life. It looks at the ways we use language to be polite or impolite, politically correct or offensive, depending on whether we are 'sweet talking', 'straight talking' or being deliberately rude. Using a range of colourful examples, it shows how we use language playfully and figuratively in order to swear, to insult, and also to be politically correct, and what our motivations are for doing so. It goes on to examine the differences between institutionalized censorship and the ways individuals censor their own language. Lively and revealing, *Forbidden Words* will fascinate anyone who is interested in how and why we use and avoid taboos in daily conversation.

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Keith Allan and Kate Burridge



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To our spice  
Wendy Allen and Ross Weber





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# 1      Taboos and their origins

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This is a book about taboo and the way in which people censor the language that they speak and write. Taboo is a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life. Taboos that we consider in the course of the book include

- bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid, etc.);
- the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation;
- diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing);
- naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and sacred beings, objects and places;
- food gathering, preparation and consumption.

Taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury. People are at metaphysical risk when dealing with sacred persons, objects and places; they are at physical risk from powerful earthly persons, dangerous creatures and disease. A person's soul or bodily effluvia may put him/her at metaphysical, moral or physical risk, and may contaminate others; a social act may breach constraints on polite behaviour. Infractions of taboos can lead to illness or death, as well as to the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Even an unintended contravention of taboo risks condemnation and censure; generally, people can and do avoid tabooed behaviour unless they intend to violate a taboo.

People constantly censor the language they use (we differentiate this from the institutionalized imposition of censorship). We examine politeness and impoliteness as they interact with orthophemism (straight talking), euphemism (sweet talking) and dysphemism (speaking offensively). We discuss the motivations for and definitions of jargon, slang, insult, and polite and impolite uses of language when naming, addressing and speaking about others, about our bodies and their functions, nourishment, sexual activities, death and killing. Political correctness and linguistic prescription are described as aspects of tabooing behaviour. We show that society's perception of a 'dirty' word's tainted **denotatum** (what the word is normally used to refer to) contaminates the word itself; and we discuss how the saliency of obscenity

and dysphemism makes the description *strong language* particularly appropriate. This is not a triumph of the offensive over the inoffensive, of dysphemism over euphemism, of impoliteness over politeness; in fact the tabooed, the offensive, the dysphemistic and the impolite only seem more powerful forces because each of them identifies the marked behaviour. By default we are polite, euphemistic, orthophemistic and inoffensive; and we censor our language use to eschew tabooed topics in pursuit of well-being for ourselves and for others.

Taboo and the consequent censoring of language motivate language change by promoting the creation of highly inventive and often playful new expressions, or new meanings for old expressions, causing existing vocabulary to be abandoned. There are basically two ways in which new expressions arise: by a changed form for the tabooed expression and by figurative language sparked by perceptions of and conceptions about the denotata (about faeces, menstrual blood, genitals, death and so on). We have shown elsewhere (e.g. Allan and Burridge 1991, Allan 2001) that the meanings and forms of some words can be traced back to several different sources; the paths from these sources converge and mutually strengthen one another as people seek a figure that is apt. In these ways taboos and the attendant censoring trigger word addition, word loss, sound change and semantic shift. They play havoc with the standard methods of historical linguistics by undermining the supposed arbitrary link between the meaning and form of words.

This book offers an interesting perspective on the human psyche, as we watch human beings react to the world around them by imposing taboos on behaviour, causing them to censor their language in order to talk about and around those taboos. Language is used as a shield against malign fate and the disapprobation of fellow human beings; it is used as a weapon against enemies and as a release valve when we are angry, frustrated or hurt. Throughout the book we are struck by the amazing poetic inventiveness of ordinary people, whose creations occasionally rival Shakespeare.

This first chapter makes a general survey of taboo before we scrutinize the nature of censorship and distinguish censoring from censorship.

### **The origins of our word *taboo***

The English word *taboo* derives from the Tongan *tabu*, which came to notice towards the end of the eighteenth century. According to Radcliffe-Brown:

In the languages of Polynesia the word means simply 'to forbid', 'forbidden', and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word *tabu*. (Radcliffe-Brown 1939: 5f)

On his first voyage of 1768–71, Captain James Cook was sent to Tahiti to observe the transit of the planet Venus across the Sun. In his logbook he wrote of the Tahitians:

the women never upon any account eat with the men, but always by themselves. What can be the reason of so unusual a custom, 'tis hard to say, especially as they are a people, in every other instance, fond of Society, and much so of their Women. They were often Asked the reason, but they never gave no other Answer, but that they did it because it was right, and Express'd much dislike at the Custom of Men and Women Eating together of the same Victuals. We have often used all the intreatys we were Masters of to invite the Women to partake of our Victuals at our Tables, but there never was an instance of one of them doing it in publick, but they would Often goe 5 or 6 together into the Servants apartments, and there eat heartily of whatever they could find, nor were they in the least disturbed if any of us came in while they were dining; and it hath sometimes hapned that when a woman was alone in our company she would eat with us, but always took care that her own people should not know what she had donn, so that whatever may be the reasons for this custom, it certainly affects their outward manners more than their Principle. (Cook 1893: 91)

Cook does not name this custom either *taboo* or by the equivalent Tahitian term *raa*. It is in the log of his third voyage, 1776–9, that he first uses the term *tabu* in an entry for 15 June 1777 and then again, five days later:

When dinner came on table not one of my guests would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was there. Every one was *Tabu*, a word of very comprehensive meaning but in general signifies forbidden.<sup>1</sup>

...

In this walk we met with about half a dozen Women in one place at supper, two of the Company were fed by the others, on our asking the reason, they said Tabu Mattee. On further enquiry, found that one of them had, two months before, washed the dead corps of a Chief, on which account she was not to handle Victuals for five Months, the other had done the same thing to a nother of inferior rank, and was under the same restriction but not for so long a time. (Cook 1967: 129, 135)

In the entry for 17 July 1777, Cook wrote:

*Taboo* as I have before observed is a word of extensive signification; Human Sacrifices are called *Tangata Taboo*, and when any thing is forbid to be eaten, or made use of they say such a thing is Taboo; they say that if the King should happen to go into a house belonging to a subject, that house would be Taboo and never more be inhabited by the owner; so that when ever he travels there are houses for his reception. (Cook 1967: 176)

In the journal entry for July 1777, the surgeon on the *Resolution*, William Anderson, wrote:

[taboo] is the common expression when any thing is not to be touch'd, unless the transgressor will risque some very severe punishment as appears from the great

apprehension they have of approaching any thing prohibited by it. In some cases it appears to resemble the Levitical law of purification, for we have seen several women who were not allow'd the use of their hands in eating but were fed by other people. On enquiring the reason of it at one time they said that one of the women had wash'd the dead body of the chief already mentioned who died at Tonga, and another who had assisted was in the same predicament, though then a month after the circumstance had happen'd. It also serves as a temporary law or edict of their chiefs, for sometimes certainly articles of food are laid under restriction, and there are other circumstances regulated in the same manner as trading &c when it is thought necessary to stop it. (Cook 1967: 948)

Tabooed objects may cease to be tabooed:

I now went and examined several Baskets which had been brought in, a thing I was not allowed to do before because every thing was then *Tabu*, but the ceremony being over they became simply what they really were, viz. empty baskets. (9 July 1777, Cook 1967: 153)

Cook and Anderson use *taboo* (or *tabu*) to describe the behaviour of Polynesians towards things that were not to be done, entered, seen or touched. Such taboos are, in some form, almost universal. For instance, there are food taboos in most societies. These are mostly religion-based: the vegetarianism of Hindus; the proscription of pork in Islam; the constraints on food preparation in Judaism; fasting among Jews at Passover and Muslims during Ramadan; the proscription of meat on Fridays among Roman Catholics – to mention just a few examples. Most human groups proscribe the eating of human flesh unless it is the flesh of a defeated enemy or, in rare cases, such as among the Aztecs, a religious ritual. Today, cannibalism is only excused as a survival mechanism as when, after an air crash in the Andes in 1972, surviving members of the Uruguayan rugby team ate the dead to stay alive. Assuming with Steiner<sup>2</sup> (among others) that the constraint against Tahitian women eating with men was regarded as a taboo on such behaviour, it appears comparable to the constraint against using your fingers instead of cutlery when dining in a restaurant. It is an example of a taboo on bad manners – one subject to the social sanction of severe disapproval, rather than putting the violator's life in danger, as some taboos do. However, we can look at this taboo in another way, as the function of a kind of caste system, in which women are a lower caste than men; this system is not dissimilar to the caste difference based on race that operated in the south of the United States of America until the later 1960s, where it was acceptable for an African American to prepare food for whites, but not to share it at table with them. This is the same caste system which permitted men to take blacks for mistresses but not marry them; a system found in colonial Africa and under the British Raj in India.



### Fatal taboos

A nineteenth-century view, attributable directly to Wundt's<sup>3</sup> 'folk psychology', is a belief attributed to so-called 'primitive peoples' that there is a 'demonic' power within a tabooed object comparable with the dangerous power of a Polynesian chief or the Emperor of Japan or Satan himself. The effect on whomsoever comes into inappropriate – if not downright unlawful – contact with a tabooed person or thing is severely detrimental to the perpetrator.<sup>4</sup> This was the common (but not universal) interpretation of the term *taboo* among anthropologists. Mead, for instance, restricts the term *taboo* 'to describe prohibition against participation in any situation of such inherent danger that the very act of participation will recoil upon the violator of the taboo'.<sup>5</sup> It is as if the tabooed object were like a radioactive fuel rod, which will have dire effects on anyone who comes into direct contact with it unless they know how to protect themselves. 'Cases are on record in which persons who had unwittingly broken a taboo actually died of terror on discovering their fatal error', writes Frazer.<sup>6</sup> To violate a taboo can lead to the auto-da-fé of the perpetrator. In old Hawai'i, a commoner who had sex with his sister was put to death. A woman who commits adultery can be stoned to death under Sharia law in parts of northern Nigeria today. Under Governor George W. Bush, a convicted murderer was very likely to be executed in the US state of Texas. According to the Bible, God told Moses, 'You shall not permit a sorceress to live' (Exodus 22: 18); implementing scripture, hundreds of heretics and witches were burned in Europe when Christianity had more political power than it does today. Although most taboo violations do not result in capital punishment, there are plenty of other sanctions on behaviour prohibited under the law – whether this is law as conceived and promulgated in a modern nation state, or traditional lore in eighteenth-century Polynesia, or (under church law) the Spanish Inquisition. That which is illegal is *ipso facto* taboo by the very fact that it is prohibited behaviour. But, as we have already seen, there is more that falls under the heading of taboo.

### Uncleanliness taboos

There are taboos in which notions of uncleanliness are the motivating factor. Many communities taboo physical contact with a menstruating woman, believing that it pollutes males in particular; some Orthodox New York Jews will avoid public transport, lest they sit where a menstruating woman has sat. Many places of worship in this world taboo menstruating women because they would defile holy sites. The Balinese used to prefer one-storey buildings so that unclean feet (and worse) would not pass above their heads; they still avoid walking under washing lines where garments that have been in contact

with unclean parts of the body might pass over their heads. Many communities taboo contact with a corpse, such that no one who has touched the cadaver is permitted to handle food.

### Violating taboo and getting away with it

In all these and similar cases, there is an assumption that both accidental breach and intentional defiance of the taboo will be followed by some kind of trouble to the offender, such as lack of success in hunting, fishing, or other business, and the sickness or the death of the offender or one of his/her relatives. In many communities, a person who meets with an accident or fails to achieve some goal will infer, as will others, that s/he has in some manner committed a breach of taboo.

Generally speaking, we do have the power to avoid tabooed behaviour. When a breach can be ascribed to 'bad karma', there remains a suspicion that the perpetrator is somehow responsible for having sinned in a former life. Even ascribing a breach to 'bad luck' is barely excusable: why is this person's luck bad? That question has a negative presupposition. The conclusion must be that any violation of taboo, however innocently committed, risks condemnation.<sup>7</sup>

Those who violate a taboo can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sin and submitting to a ritual. The *OED* (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989) quotes from Cook's *Voyage to the Pacific* ii. xi (1785) I. 410: 'When the *taboo* is incurred, by paying obeisance to a great personage, it is thus easily washed off.' Hobley describes a Kikuyu ritual for legitimizing and purifying an incestuous relationship:

It sometimes happens, however, that a young man unwittingly marries a cousin; for instance, if a part of the family moves away to another locality a man might become acquainted with a girl and marry her before he discovered the relationship. In such a case the *thahu* [or *ngahu*, the result of the violation of the taboo] is removable, the elders take a sheep and place it on the woman's shoulders, and it is then killed, the intestines are taken out and the elders solemnly sever them with a sharp splinter of wood . . . and they announce that they are cutting the clan '*kutinyarurira*', by which they mean that they are severing the bond of blood relationship that exists between the pair. A medicine man then comes and purifies the couple. (Hobley 1910: 438)

In the Nguni societies of southern Africa who practise *hlonipha*, under which it is forbidden for a woman to use her father-in-law's name or even to utter words containing the syllables of his name (particularly in his presence), inadvertent violation of the taboo may be mitigated by spitting on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Christians confess their sins to a priest and are given absolution on behalf of God.<sup>9</sup>

## Exploiting taboo

Taboos are open to beneficial exploitation. A person's body is, unless s/he is a slave, sacrosanct. By tradition, a Maori chief's body is taboo. Once upon a time, the chief might claim land by saying that the land is his backbone – which makes invading it taboo. Or he could claim possession by saying things like *Those two canoes are my two thighs*.<sup>10</sup> The taboos on a chief could be utilized by their minions: 'they gave the names of important chiefs to their pet animals and thus prevented others from killing them', wrote Steiner.<sup>11</sup> Samoans sometimes tabooed their plantation trees by placing certain signs close to them to warn off thieves.<sup>12</sup> One sign indicated that it would induce ulcerous sores; an afflicted thief could pay off the plantation owner who would supply a (supposed) remedy. Most dire was the death taboo, made by pouring oil into a small calabash buried near the tree; a mound of white sand marked the taboo, which was said to be very effective in keeping thieves at bay in old Samoa.

The genital organs of humans are always subject to some sort of taboo; those of women are usually more strongly tabooed than those of men, partly for social and economic reasons, but ultimately because they are the source of new human life. Few women today are aware of the supposed power of the exposed vulva (commonly referred to as 'vagina') to defeat evil. The great Greek-mythical warrior Bellerophon, who tamed Pegasus and the Amazons and slew the dragon-like Chimaera, called on Poseidon to inundate Xanthos; he was defeated by the women of Xanthos raising their skirts, driving back the waves, and frightening Pegasus. Images of a woman exposing her vulva are found above doors and gateways in Europe, Indonesia and South America; in many European countries such figures are also located in medieval castles and, surprisingly, many churches. They include the *Sheela-n-Gig* images (from Irish *Síle na gCioch* or more likely *Síle in-a giob* 'Sheela on her haunches'), such as that in Figure 1.1 from L'église de Ste Radegonde, Poitiers, France. The display of the tabooed body part is a potent means of defeating evil.

One eighteenth-century engraving by Charles Eisen for an edition of the book *Fables* by Jean de la Fontaine depicts the ability of an exposed vagina to dispel evil forces beautifully . . . In this striking image, a young woman stands, confident and unafraid, confronting the devil. Her left hand rests lightly on a wall, while her right raises her skirt high, displaying her sexual centre for Satan to see. And in the face of her naked womanhood, the devil reels back in fear. (Blackledge 2003: 9)

## Less serious taboos

Taboo is more than ritual prohibition and avoidance. We have seen that infractions of taboos can be dangerous to the individual and to his/her society; they can lead to illness or death. But there are also milder kinds of taboo, the



Figure 1.1. A woman exposing her vulva, L'église de Ste Radegonde.

violation of which results in the lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Humans are social beings and every human being is a member of at least a gender, a family, a generation and – normally – also friendship, recreational and occupational groups. An individual's behaviour is subject to sanction within these groups and by the larger community. Some groups, for example the family and sports-team supporters, have unwritten conventions governing behavioural standards; others, for example local or national government, have written regulations or laws. Groups with written regulations also have unwritten conventions governing appropriate behaviour. In all cases, sanctions on behaviour arise from beliefs supposedly held in common by a consensus of members of the community or from an authoritative body within the group. Although Freud<sup>13</sup> has claimed that 'Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown

origin', it seems obvious to us that taboos normally arise out of social constraints on the individual's behaviour. They arise in cases where the individual's acts can cause discomfort, harm or injury to him/herself and to others. The constraint on behaviour is imposed by someone or some physical or metaphysical force that the individual believes has authority or power over them – the law, the gods, the society in which one lives, even proprioceptions (as in the self-imposed proscription, *Chocolates are taboo for me, they give me migraine*).

There can be sound reasons for putting specific parts of our lives out of bounds. Rules against incest seem eminently sensible from an evolutionary point of view. Communities remain healthier if human waste is kept at arm's length. Many food prejudices have a rational origin. Avoidance speech styles help prevent conflict in relationships that are potentially volatile. Of course, once the taboo rituals are in place, the motives (sound or otherwise) usually become obscured. Original meaning gives way to symbolic idiom, although different stories may later suggest themselves. Take the taboo against spilling salt. Indispensable to life, vital to the preservation of food and a delicacy in cooking, salt was once the symbol of purity and incorruptibility. It was also expensive. Spilling such a precious commodity was calamitous; it may even have exposed the perpetrator to evil forces, because the devil is repulsed by salt. In this case, evil is averted quite simply by throwing a pinch of the spilt salt with the right hand over the left shoulder. The reason for 'left' and 'right' here stem from old associations: the left side is weak and bad while the right is strong and good. Those among us who still engage in this sort of irrational behaviour don't stop to think about the original motivations for the ritual. There's just a vague notion that the act of spilling salt somehow brings bad luck – and we don't tempt fate.

To an outsider, many prohibitions are perplexing and seem silly. But they are among the common values that link the people of a community together. What one group values, another scorns. Shared taboos are therefore a sign of social cohesion. Moreover, as part of a wider belief system, they provide the basis people need to function in an otherwise confused and hostile environment. The rites and rituals that accompany taboos give the feeling of control over situations where ordinary mortals have little or none – such as death, illness, bodily functions and even the weather in those communities that still practice rain ceremonies. Mary Douglas' anthropological study of ritual pollution offers insights here.<sup>14</sup> As she saw it, the distinction between cleanliness and filth stems from the basic human need to structure experience and render it understandable. That which is taboo threatens chaos and disorder.

### **There is no such thing as an absolute taboo**

Nothing is taboo for all people, under all circumstances, for all time. There is an endless list of behaviours 'tabooed' yet nonetheless practised at some time

in (pre)history by people for whom they are presumably not taboo. This raises a philosophical question: if Ed recognizes the existence of a taboo against patricide and then deliberately flouts it by murdering his father, is patricide not a taboo for Ed? Any answer to this is controversial; our position is that at the time the so-called taboo is flouted it does not function as a taboo for the perpetrator. This does not affect the status of patricide as a taboo in the community of which Ed is a member, nor the status of patricide as a taboo for Ed at other times in his life. Our view is that, although a taboo can be accidentally breached without the violator putting aside the taboo, when the violation is deliberate, the taboo is not merely ineffectual but inoperative.

Sometimes one community recognizes a taboo (e.g. late eighteenth-century Tahitian women not eating with men) which another (Captain Cook's men) does not. In seventeenth-century Europe, women from all social classes, among them King Charles I's wife Henrietta Maria, commonly exposed one or both breasts in public as a display of youth and beauty.<sup>15</sup> No European queen would do that today. Australian news services speak and write about the recently deceased and also show pictures, a practice which is taboo in many Australian Aboriginal communities. You may be squeamish about saying *fuck* when on a public stage, but lots of people are not. Today, no public building, let alone place of worship, would be allowed to incorporate a display of the vulva like that pictured above from L'église de Ste Radegonde. You may believe it taboo for an adult to have sex with a minor, but hundreds of thousands of people have not shared that taboo, or else they have put it aside. Incest is tabooed in most communities, but Pharaoh Ramses II (fl. 1279–1213 BCE) married several of his daughters. Voltaire (1694–1778) had an affair with his widowed niece Mme Marie Louise Denis (née Mignot, 1712–90), to whom he wrote passionately in terms such as:

My child, I shall adore you until I'm in my grave . . . I would like to be the only one to have had the happiness of fucking you, and I now wish I had slept with no-one but you, and had never come but with you. I have a hard on as I write to you and I kiss a thousand times your beautiful breasts and beautiful arse.<sup>16</sup>

Not your typical 'cher oncle'. It is tabooed in most jurisdictions to marry a sibling, but some of the Pharaohs did it; so did the Hawai'ian royal family, among others. Killing people is taboo in most societies; though from time to time and in various places, human sacrifice has been practised, usually to propitiate gods or natural forces that it is thought would otherwise harm the community. Killing enemies gets rewarded everywhere, and judicial execution of traitors and murderers is common. Some Islamists believe that blowing themselves up along with a few infidels leads to Paradise. The Christian God said to Moses, 'He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death' (Exodus 21: 12). Yet in the Bible we find human sacrifice approved in

the murder of an Israelite and a Midianite woman ‘so [that] the plague was stayed from the children of Israel’ (Numbers 25: 8). God had it in for the Midianites; he told Moses to ‘vex . . . and smite them’ (Numbers 25: 17). ‘And [the Israelites] warred against the Midianites as the Lord commanded Moses; and they slew all the males’, burned their cities, and looted their cattle and chattels (Numbers 31: 7–11). Then Moses sent the Israelites back to complete the Lord’s work by killing all male children and women of child-bearing age, keeping other females ‘for yourselves’ (Numbers 31: 17–18). God’s work or not, this is military behaviour that would be tabooed today and might lead to a war crimes trial. We are forced to conclude that every taboo must be specified for a particular community of people, for a specified context, at a given place and time. There is no such thing as an absolute taboo (one that holds for all worlds, times and contexts).

### **Taboo applies to behaviour**

As originally used in the Pacific islands when first visited by Europeans, taboos prohibited certain people (particularly women), either permanently or temporarily, from certain actions, from contact with certain things and certain other people. A tabooed person was ostracized. The term *taboo* came to be used with reference to similar customs elsewhere in the world, especially where taboos arose from respect for, and fear of, metaphysical powers; it was extended to political and social affairs, and generalized to the interdiction of the use or practice of anything, especially an expression or topic, considered offensive and therefore avoided or prohibited by social custom.

Where something physical or metaphysical is said to be tabooed, what is in fact tabooed is its interaction with an individual, a specified group of persons or, perhaps, the whole community. In short, a taboo applies to behaviour.

**Taboo** refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons, at a specifiable time, in specifiable contexts.

In principle, any kind of behaviour can be tabooed. For behaviour to be proscribed, it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or to his/her community; but the degree of harm can fall anywhere on a scale from a breach of etiquette to downright fatality.

In this book, we are largely concerned with language behaviour. One hears of people who would like to erase obscene terms like *cunt* and slurs like *idiot* and *nigger* from the English language; most people recognize after a few moments’ reflection that this is a wish that is impossible to grant – not least because, under the conditions of their creation, these words will not be taboo. Such words are as much a part of English as all the other words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, there is evidence that swear words occupy a

different brain location from other vocabulary; people said never to have sworn earlier in their lifetime often lose other language but do swear as senile dementia sets in.<sup>17</sup> It is possible to taboo language behaviour in certain specified contexts; in fact it is often done. Some tabooed behaviours are prohibited by law; all are deprecated and lead to social, if not legal, sanction.

### Censorship and censors

The 1791 First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States proclaims:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

We take this, and in particular the clauses referring to freedom of speech and freedom to publish, as succinctly describing the antithesis to the censorship of language.

The *censorship* was instituted in ancient Rome in 443 BCE and discontinued in 22 BCE. The *censor* was a magistrate with the original function of registering citizens and assessing their property for taxation. This sense lives on in our noun *census*. Our theme of taboo and the censoring of language can ignore as irrelevant the original link between censor and census, though there is a throwback to this sense when censors claim to reflect and act upon the consensus of right-thinking people in their community.

The work of a Roman censor expanded to include supervision of moral conduct, with the authority to *censure* and penalize offenders against public morality. For many centuries, in many cultures and jurisdictions, governments have exercised censorship as a means of regulating the moral and political life of their people. Thus, according to the *OED*, the censor was and is a person ‘whose duty it is to inspect all books, journals, dramatic pieces, etc., before publication, to secure that they shall contain nothing immoral, heretical, or offensive to the government’.

The sentiment is to be found in Aristotle’s *Politics* towards the end of Book VII, written c.350 BCE:

there is nothing that the legislator should be more careful to drive away than indecency of speech; for the light utterance of shameful words leads to shameful actions. The young especially should never be allowed to repeat or hear anything of that sort. A freeman if he be found saying or doing what is forbidden, if he be too young as yet to have the privilege of reclining at the public tables, should be disgraced and beaten, and an elder person degraded as his slavish conduct deserves. And since we do not allow improper language, clearly we should also banish pictures or speeches from the stage



which are indecent. Let the rulers take care that there be no image or picture representing unseemly actions, except in the temples of those gods at whose festivals the law permits even ribaldry, and whom the law also permits to be worshipped by persons of mature age on behalf of themselves, their children, and their wives. But the legislators should not allow youth to be spectators of iambi [satire] or of comedy until they are of an age to sit at the public tables and to drink strong wine; by that time education will have armed them against the evil influences of such representations. (Aristotle 1984: 1336<sup>b</sup>4–23)

Censorship is often extended to the control of news, propaganda and even would-be private correspondence of civil prisoners in times of hot and cold war or other perceived national emergency or external threat. Thus censors are thought police given to *censure*, given to presenting ‘adverse judgement, unfavourable opinion, hostile criticism; blaming, finding fault with, or condemning as wrong; expression of disapproval or condemnation’, according to the *OED*.

Censors license for public distribution speeches, writings and other works of art, scholarship and reportage; but they are less celebrated for what they sanction than infamous for what they restrict and prohibit. These are the characteristics that affect our understanding of the words *censorship* and *censoring*.

### Censorship in Tudor, Jacobean and Stuart England

The relevant definition of *censorship* for our purposes focuses on language:

**Censorship** is the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is condemned as subversive of the common good.

The problem lies in the interpretation of the phrase *subversive of the common good*. For instance, the censorship of incitement to (as well as actual) violence against any citizen supposedly guards against his/her physical harm. The censorship of profanity and blasphemy supposedly guards against his/her moral harm. The censorship of pornography supposedly guards against his/her moral harm, and perhaps physical danger, by someone stimulated to rapine action by exposure to the excitement of pornography. A concern for the common good and for the protection of the citizenry from physical and moral jeopardy is expressed in the following preamble to a City of London Ordinance of 6 December 1574, regulating dramatic performances:

Whereas heartofore sondrye greate disorders and inconvenyences have been found to ensewe to this Cittie by the inordynate hauntynge of greate multitudes of people, speciallye youthe, to playes, enterludes and shewes; namelye occasyon of frayes and quarrelles, eavell practizes of incontineneye in greate Innes, havinge chambers and secrete places adjoyninge to their open stagies and gallyries, inveyglynge and

alleurynge of maides, speciallye orphanes, and good cityzens children under age, to previe and unmete contractes, the publishinge of unchaste, uncomelye, and unshamefaste speeches and doynge, withdrawinge of the Quenes Majesties subjectes from dyvyne service on Soundaies & hollydayes, at which tymes such playes weare chefeleye used, unthriftye waste of the moneye of the poore & fond persons, sondrye robberies by pyckinge and cuttinge of purses, utteringe of popular, busye and sedyicious matters, and manie other corruptions of youthe, and other enormities; besydes that allso soundrye slaughters and mayhemminges of the Quenes Subjectes have happened by ruines of Scaffoldes, Frames and Stagies, and by engynes, weapons and powder used in plaies. And whear in tyme of Goddes visitacion by the plague suche assemblies of the people in thronge and presse have benne verye daungerous for spreadinge of Infection. (Gildersleeve 1961: 156f)

In the view of Elizabethan London's aldermen, attendance at plays keeps the youth away from divine service and wastes their money while they – especially the maids, streetkids and underage children among them – are in moral jeopardy of being led astray by exposure to drink, seditious and indecent talk, and licentious behaviour. They are also in physical danger from affray, muggers, murderers, from the collapse of stages and stands, and from gunpowder and the like used in stage effects. Furthermore, the congregation of people risks spreading the deadly plague (which regularly killed about forty people a week in London, with occasional outbreaks that killed hundreds). Recognizable echoes of such concerns recur across the intervening centuries, although assessments of what constitutes protection of the common good varies; for instance, today we worry not about the plague but about SARS or HIV and AIDS.

The tradition of censorship in the English-speaking world arose from the religious troubles of the Reformation and the policies of Henry VIII in the 1530s. For many centuries, the focus was on suppressing heresy and anything likely to stir up political revolt; before the nineteenth century, it was rare to find the concern with indecency and licentiousness evident in the 1574 quotation above: 'inveyglynge and alleurynge of maides, speciallye orphanes, and good cityzens children under age, to previe and unmete contractes, the publishinge of unchaste, uncomelye, and unshamefaste speeches and doynge'. An Act for the Advancement of True Religion and for the Abolishment of the Contrary (Statute 34 and 35 Henry VIII cap. 1, 1543) orders suppression of anything conflicting with doctrines authorized by the King in sermons and 'prynted bokes, prynted balades, playes, rymes, songes, and other fantasies'.<sup>18</sup> Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, Mary I (1553–8), reinstituted the Roman Catholic religion which was subsequently revoked by her half-sister Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Mary proclaimed on 18 August 1553:

And furthermore, forasmuche also as it is well knowen, that sedition and false rumours haue bene nouryshed and maynteyned in this realme, by the subteltye and malyce of

some euell disposed persons, whiche take vpon them withoute sufficient auctoritie, to preache, and to interprete the worde of God, after theyr owne brayne, in churches and other places, both publique and pryuate. And also by playenge of Interludes and pryntyng false fonde bookes, ballettes, rymes, and other lewde treatises in the englyshe tonge, concernynge doctryne in matters now in question and controuersye, touchinge the hyghe poyntes and misteries of christen religion . . . Her highnes therfore strayghtly chargeth and commaundeth all and every her sayde subiectes . . . that none of them presume from henceforth to preache . . . or to interprete or teache any scriptures, or any maner poynts of doctryne concernynge religion. Neyther also to prynte any bookes, matter, ballet, ryme, interlude, processe or treatyse, nor to playe any interlude, except they haue her graces speciall licence in writynge for the same, vpon payne to incurrer her highnesse indignation and displeasure. (Gildersleeve 1961: 10f)

Taking the Lord's name in vain<sup>19</sup> was frowned upon and eventually banned – which is mild retribution compared with what the Bible sanctions:

And he that blasphemeth the name of the LORD, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him: as well the stranger, as he that is born in the land, when he blasphemeth the name of the LORD, shall be put to death. (Leviticus 24: 16)

Elizabeth I is reputed to have favoured *God's wounds* as an oath,<sup>20</sup> but during her reign arose euphemisms like 'sblood ⇒ 's'lood ⇒ 'slud,<sup>21</sup> 'sbody, 'sfoot, 'slid [eyelid], 'slight, 'snails, 'sprecious [body] and zounds, a fore-clipping of *God*, sometimes also remodelled, e.g. *God's wounds* ⇒ 'swounds ⇒ zounds, pronounced /zunz/ ⇒ zaunds, pronounced /zaunz/. Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* of 1749<sup>22</sup> omits letters to euphemize, e.g. 'Z—ds and bl—d, sister' (XVI.4) and contains 'Sbodlikins (X.5) and Odsbud! (XVI.7) as variants of *God's body*, along with *Odsooks!* (XII.7) and *Odzoopers!* (XVIII.9) from *God's hooks* (nailing Christ to the cross) and *Odrabbet it!* (XVI.2) or *Od rabbit it* (XVII.3, XVIII.9) from *God rot it!* ('confound it'), which lives on in *drat it. I' fackins* (X.9) is a variant of *i' faith* and *Icod!* (XVIII.8) derives from either *in God's name* or *By God*.

How does remodelling work? The following explanation says something about misspellings, which one might look upon as accidental remodellings:

Aoccdmrig to a rsecherear at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is that frist and lsat ltteer are in the rghit plcae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by itslef but the wrod as a wlohe.

No fluent speaker of English has any trouble reading the above (which explains the power of the designer label FCUK).<sup>23</sup> Taking context into account, and working on a system of analysis-by-synthesis, we match misspelled words with their normal forms. A similar kind of constructive process is used in making sense of the following story of *Ladle Rat Rotten Hut*.

Wants pawn term dare worsted ladle gull hoe lift wetter murder inner ladle cordage honor itch offer lodge dock florist. Disc ladle gull orphan worry ladle cluck wetter putty ladle rat hut, end fur disc raisin pimple caulder Ladle Rat Rotten Hut. Wan moaning Rat Rotten Hut's murder colder inset: 'Ladle Rat Rotten Hut, heresy ladle basking winsome burden barter end shirker cockles. Tick disc ladle basking tudor cordage offer groin murder honor udder site offer florist. Shaker lake, dun stopper laundry wrote, end yonder nor sorghum stenchs dun stopper torque wet strainers.' (Garner 1994: 1–2)

Here, normal English words are used, but not in normal contexts. Based on the assumption that the author intends to communicate something coherent, the reader makes the effort to construct meaning and finds a phonetic similarity to syntactically coherent sequences of words that tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood. The point of this digression is that when language is systematically remodelled with the intention of communicating, the fluent speaker doesn't normally have too much trouble recognizing the intended meaning. Thus the use of an expression like *Golly!* communicates as effectively as the profane use of the expletive *God!*

In 1606, the Act to Restraine Abuses of Players (3 Jac.I. cap.21) severely penalized profanity:

If . . . any person or persons doe or shall in any Stage play, Interlude, Shewe, Maygame or Pageant jestingly or prophanely speake or use the holy name of God or of Christ Jesus, or of the Holy Ghoste or of the Trinitie . . . [they] shall forfeite for every such Offence by him or theme committed Tenne pounds. (Quoted in Hughes 1991: 103)

In consequence, the 1616 folio of Ben Jonson's plays replaces *By Jesu* with *Believe me*. A 1634 edition of Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster* (first acted c.1608) had *Faith* either cut or replaced by *Indeed* or (somewhat strangely) by *Marry* – a remodelling of Christ's mother's name; *By Heaven* is remodelled to *By these hilts*; and *by the (just) Gods* is altered to *By my sword*, *By my life*, *By all that's good*, *By Nemesis*, *And I vow*, despite the original reference to pagan gods not being truly profane for a Christian.<sup>24</sup> Religious censorship remained in force until significantly weakened during the twentieth century. The fact that Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (a photograph of a cheap plastic crucifix in urine)<sup>25</sup> has been accused of being blasphemous demonstrates this. US Senator Alfonse D'Amato began an address to the Senate on 18 May 1989 with these words:

Mr President, several weeks ago, I began to receive a number of letters, phone calls, and postcards from constituents throughout the Senate concerning art work by Andres Serrano. They express a feeling of shock, of outrage, and anger. They said, 'How dare you spend our taxpayers' money on this trash.' They all objected to taxpayers' money being used for a piece of so-called art work which, to be quite candid, I am somewhat reluctant to utter its title. This so-called piece of art is a deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity. The art work in question is a photograph of the crucifix submerged in the artist's urine.<sup>26</sup>

When *Piss Christ* travelled to Australia in September 1997, Roman Catholic Archbishop (later cardinal) Dr George Pell said, in an affidavit before the court, 'Both the name and the image Piss Christ not only demean Christianity but also represent a grossly offensive, scurrilous and insulting treatment of Christianity's most sacred and holy symbol.' On 12 October 1997, the photograph was attacked with a hammer in the National Gallery of Victoria and immediately removed from exhibition.<sup>27</sup>

### **Restrictions on language and weapons have the same motivation**

Criticism of monarchs, heads of state and other persons of rank is often severely censored, particularly in times of national instability. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, remarks were censored if they were perceived to be hostile to the prevailing government ideology and powerful foreign allies, or likely to stir up discontent and create disorder. For instance, the deposition scene from Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act IV.i) was expurgated from the first and second quartos (1597 and 1598), and it was alleged in early 1601 to have been a symbol of insurrection for supporters of the rebellion of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, which led to his execution.<sup>28</sup> The correlation of words and actions was recognized in John Milton's *Areopagitica* of 1644:

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how Bookes demeane themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors: For books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. (Milton 1644: 4)

Milton suggests that books do purvey ideas; but they are no more likely to 'spring up armed men' than the dragons' teeth of fable. On the face of it, language censorship – like the restriction on gun ownership – is a reasonable constraint against abuses of social interaction amongst human beings. However, attitudes to restrictions on gun ownership in, say, Britain differ markedly from those of many citizens of the United States – especially from members of the politically powerful National Rifle Association. The NRA champions the right to bear arms in accordance with the Second Amendment of the US Constitution: 'A well-regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.' (Furthermore, forty-four states have constitutional provisions affirming the individual's right to keep and bear arms.) Some Americans, together with most people who live outside of the US, correlate the resulting

very extensive gun-ownership in that country with the proportionately much higher incidence of gun-inflicted injury and death than in any otherwise comparable country (e.g. in 1993, 66 per million versus 1.4 per million in the UK).<sup>29</sup> Statistical evidence on the effects of widespread gun-ownership fails to influence the views of the NRA supporters – their belief in the rightness of their cause outweighs any rational counterargument. Compare this situation with what happens with respect to language censorship: certain beliefs are held by politically powerful members of the community on the ways that language can subvert the common good, and no amount of rational argument against their position will be accepted.

### Milton against censorship

John Milton (1608–74) was not only the greatest epic poet in English (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*), but also a libertarian historian and pamphleteer on behalf of the Anglican Church, civil liberties and democratic values. *Areopagitica* became a classic, though it had very little effect in its own time. It argues against the censorship law of 14 June 1643, but applies to censorship of any kind at any period. The 1643 order was specifically a response to ‘false . . . scandalous, seditious, and libellous [works published] . . . to the great defamation of Religion and government’. It was a time of social and political instability that, within a couple of years, led to civil war and the execution of King Charles I in January 1649. Since Henry VIII broke with Rome over a century earlier, there had been ideological conflict between the Protestant majority and papists who were widely suspected of sedition, especially after the Gunpowder Plot was thwarted in November 1605. Milton’s principal argument against censorship is that it chokes access to knowledge (‘Truth’ and ‘Wisdom’), stifles the pursuit of art and learning, and cripples human development and progress:

it will be primely to the discouragement of all learning and the stop of Truth, not only by disexercising and blunting our abilities in what we know already, but by hindring and cropping the discovery that may bee yet further made in religious and civill Wisdome.

. . . unlesse warinesse be us’d, as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, Gods Image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it self, kills the Image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalm’d and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life. ’Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great losse; and revolutions of ages doe not oft recover the losse of rejected truth, for the want of which whole Nations fare the worse.

. . .

Well knows he who uses to consider, that our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion. Truth is compar’d in Scripture to a streaming

fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetuall progression, they sick'n into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition. (Milton 1644: 4, 26)

History shows that censorship empowers people who are by inclination illiberal and unlikely to be artistically creative or broadly schooled. The judgment of a censor is open to error, fashion, whim and corruption:<sup>30</sup>

the Councell of Trent, and the Spanish Inquisition engendring together brought forth, or perfeted those Catalogues and expurging Indexes, that rake through the entralls of many an old good Author, with a violation wors then any could be offer'd to his tomb. Nor did they stay in matters Hereticall, but any subject that was not to their palat, they either condemn'd in a prohibition, or had it strait into the new Purgatory of an Index.

...

The State shall be my governours, but not my criticks; they may be mistak'n in the choice of a licenser, as easily as this licenser may be mistak'n in an author: this is some common stuffe; and he might add from Sir *Francis Bacon*, That *such authoriz'd books are but the language of the times*. For though a licenser should happ'n to be judicious more then ordinary, which will be a great jeopardy of the next succession, yet his very office, and his commission enjoyns him to let passe nothing but what is vulgarly receiv'd already.

...

[In Italy in 1638] I found and visited the famous *Galileo*, grown old a prisner to the Inquisition, for thinking in Astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensors thought. (Milton 1644: 7, 22, 24)

Here is an early twentieth-century view of censors:

CENSORSHIP in action has little to recommend it. Suppression is a sordid, unhappy sport. The legal chicanery brings out the worst in every one concerned . . . To act the rôle of censor develops a lack of honesty more anti-social than any amount of sexual excess. The perfect censor does not exist. (Ernst and Seagle 1928: 13)

Trust should be placed in the judgment of the individual person, and tolerance is the best policy:

suddenly a vision sent from God, it is his own Epistle that so avers it, confirm'd him [Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria c.190–265 CE] in these words: Read any books what ever come to thy hands, for thou art sufficient both to judge aright, and to examine each matter. To this revelation he assented the sooner, as he confesses, because it was answerable to that of the Apostle to the Thessalonians, Prove [= try] all things, hold fast that which is good.<sup>31</sup> And he might have added another remarkable saying of the same Author; To the pure all things are pure,<sup>32</sup> not only meats and drinks, but all kinde of knowledge whether of good or evill; the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequently the books, if the will and conscience be not defil'd.

...

Yet if all cannot be of one mind, as who looks they should be? this doubtless is more wholesome, more prudent, and more Christian that many be tolerated, rather than all compell'd. (Milton 1644: 11, 37)

Milton would have been thinking only of sophisticated, well-educated (male Protestant) individuals like himself; on behalf of such people he offers a strong argument against censorship. The counterargument from Big Brother is that censorship is necessary to protect the innocent, the inexperienced, the ignorant, the morally weak.<sup>33</sup> The alternative is an invitation to anarchy. Perhaps we can identify groups within a society who do manage to act without admitting any censorship, linguistic or otherwise, on their behaviour; but there exists no comprehensive society (constituted of humans of both sexes, all ages and in a full range of occupations) that does not censor some kinds of behaviour – by custom if not by law. The problem for any human society is how to constrain censorship in order to allow for maximum expression of personal freedoms without these subverting the common good.

### Is censorship futile?

Censorship fails to prevent people intent on flouting it:

this Order avails nothing to the suppressing of scandalous, seditious, and libellous Books, which are mainly intended to be suppressed. (Milton 1644: 4)

Not that this infelicity has ever stopped the imposition of censorship.<sup>34</sup> A document emanating from the office of Master of the King's Revels less than nineteen years after Milton published these words (25 July 1663) suggests that previous ordinances must have been ineffective:

That the Master of his Maiesties office of the Revells, hath the power of Lycencing all playes whether Tragedies, or Comedies before they can bee acted, is without dispute and the designe is, that all prophaneness, oathes, ribaldry, and matters reflecting upon piety, and the present government may bee obliterated, before there bee any action in a publique Theatre.

The like equitie there is, that all Ballads, songs and poems of that nature, should pass the same examinacion, being argued a Major ad Minus, and requiring the same antidote, because such things presently fly all over the Kingdom, to the Debauching and poisoning the younger sort of people, unles corrected, and regulated.

The like may bee said as to all Billes for Shewes, and stage playes, Mountebankes, Lotteries &c. (Gildersleeve 1961: 86)

Laws issued since then show that censorship is like whistling in the wind.

As well as engaging in sexual perversions with actresses, his wife and his sister-in-law, the Marquis de Sade<sup>35</sup> was able to exploit his position as a well-connected member of the *ancien régime* of pre-revolutionary France to commit sodomy, rape, whippings and mutilations of prostitutes; and to abduct and sexually abuse boys and girls. He also masturbated on a crucifix. For such behaviours he was imprisoned, executed in effigy, and only escaped the guillotine by chance. His fictional accounts of violent