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Broken Air

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It is primarily through ears that never close that we experience the world. They are, says Boethius, the most receptive of all to learning.¹ Four of the *artes liberales*—*grammatica*, *dialectica*, *rhetorica*, *musica*—are devoted to the pursuance of *ratio* through sound. True, the arts of the trivium presuppose a literacy that operates visually, yet grammar traditionally defines itself as *scientia recte loquendi*, the “art of right speaking,” and the medieval reading process is, as we know, closely connected to the oral and hence to the acoustical. If we receive truth acoustically, we produce it orally. With the mouth we make both speech and song, with the mouth we produce the most complex manifold of rational sound, and thus with the mouth we make most noise. Sound, says Chaucer, is naught but *eyr ybroken*;² so any body-part through which air naturally exits constitutes a ready-made wind instrument or noise-machine.

It requires some imaginative effort to appreciate how medieval grammar and music were perceived as intrinsically ethical. Noise possesses a moral force quite lost on modern ears; it is a kind of audible violence; corruption is something one can hear. Within the acoustical cosmos, noise inhabits sound less as *audibilia* of some precise pitch or decibel-count than relationally, as a principle of violence, which effects its damage by contrariety or intensification, that is, by a kind of defect or excess of consonant sound. In the following sections, we consider the various violent forms that bodily noise assumes; how we “break air” (or rather wind), grammatically, musically, with the mouth, and

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¹ Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.3.

² *House of Fame*, line 765 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

with its pneumatic reverse, the butt. Finally, we consider bodily noise as *noyous*, as a vocabulary of aggression and the occasion of harm, from its metaphoric presence on the battlefield to its real presence in the private space of marriage.

Grammatical Noise

What kind of voice-noises are there? For Priscian, this is a grammatical question, and his consideration in the first book of *Institutionum grammaticarum* of the fundamental category of *vox* includes many kinds of vocal *audibilia*, not only words.³ *Vox* or “speech” has a broad range of meaning. One may refer, for example, to the harmonious *vox* of a flute, but in this context, the word is best translated as “vocal utterance,” that is, patterned sound that comes out of the mouth and only the mouth. What is striking about Priscian’s grammatical treatise is his inclusion of and interest in identifying voice-sounds that fall outside the scope of language in its narrow sense. Far from being sound alien to language, voice-noise inhabits grammar, as dissonance within.

Priscian first subdivides *vox* into four aspects (“Vocis autem differentiae sunt quattuor”): articulate (*articulata*), inarticulate (*inarticulata*), scriptable or capable of being written down (*literata*), and non-scriptable (*illiterata*). Referring initially to limbs, *articulata*, which literally means “jointed,” usually refers to knuckles or small limbs, but by extension to grammar, means “distinctly divided,” hence “syllabic.” Priscian, however, describes *articulata* as a sound that is joined “cum aliquo sensu mentis” (“with some mental understanding”), suggesting that by the term he refers to distinct meanings rather than sounds, to semantic rather than phonetic precision. *Articulata* thus means “intelligible.”

Literata connects both the scriptable and phonetic aspect of utterance. If there is an acceptable combination of vowels and consonants capable of capturing the sound made by the mouth then the sound is *literata*; if not, *illiterata*. Take, for example, *grust*, *blomby*, *ngust*, and *glbombr*.⁴ None of them means anything in English and hence all are *voces inarticulatae*. *Grust* and *blomby*, however, could feasibly become words, since they satisfy all the phonetic criteria by which syllables are formed in the English language. They are then *voces literatae* because their sounds can be transcribed onto the page. But *ngust* and *glbombr* do not conform to that pattern of English phonemes from which we form syllables. There are restrictions on the combinations in which English phonemes can occur. The /ŋ/ phoneme (as in *ngust*) cannot occur at the beginning of a word although it can at the end of a word (as in *sing*), and the consonant cluster *glb* simply does not occur in the English language though it may in some other. Deep sound laws make some sounds intuitively acceptable and others not: *ngust* and *glbombr* are not; they are both *inarticulatae* and *illiteratae*, most unintelligible of voice-noises.

From these four aspects of *vox*, Priscian composes four categories. The first, *vox articulata literata* (“intelligible, scriptable speech”), refers to voice-noises that are grammatically meaningful,

³ In Heinrich Keil, *Grammatici latini* (Lipsiae, in aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1855), 2.5-6.

⁴ See C.L. Barber, *The Story of Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Pan, 1972), 14-15.

noises that can be parsed into formal structures such as the eight parts of speech, the sounds that make up words and sentences. *Vox articulata literata* creates rational discourse, the gift of humanity. This is no “noise” in the pejorative sense familiar to us. The example Priscian offers is the opening line of what was arguably the greatest poem of his culture, the *Aeneid*: *Arma virumque cano* (“Of arms and of a man I sing”). The rules of grammar emerge out of the process of reading fine literature, ideally the strict metrical arrangements of poetry, which bestows upon language a perfected form because it both speaks and counts, joining *verbum* with *numerus*. *Ars grammatica* is not simply a question of mechanical parsing but of building up the control of the vocal organs so their correct placing and coordination become instinctive. Noise arises from flaccid buccal organs, but in *vox articulata literata* we see stomatic movements licked into the shape of *sentence*.

The second category, *vox articulata illiterata* (“intelligible, non-scriptable speech”) refers to voice-noises that are semantically distinct (*articulata*) but not capable of being written down (*illiterata*). Note that Priscian does not supply any specific examples here, and for a good reason: they can’t be written down. Instead he illustrates by the general descriptors of hisses (*sibili*) and moaning (*gemitus*). A world of meaning can reside in a well placed sigh or click of the tongue, and to that extent *vox articulata illiterata* signifies just like any other word; but, not employing the phonetic options available in our language, its sounds are confused, and can only be approximated in writing – “mmmm,” “tsk,” “hrrumph,” “pshaw.” Lacking vowels, or using unacceptable consonant clusters, these are not “words” as such. Although we do write them down, and I just have, they are to Priscian, unscriptable, *illiteratae*. To dignify them by writing, to make “literature” of them, demeans any *grammaticus* worthy of the name. These *voce*s are the hisses (*sibili*) and moans (*gemitus*) that come out of our mouths in place of expletives proper. In contrast, interjections, such as “damn,” “hooray,” or Latin *heu* (“alas”), are bona fide grammatical emphases belonging to the eight parts of speech. *Hrrumph* may be just as emotively loaded as *damn*, but the latter is scriptable while the former is not.

This category clearly demonstrates the interdependence between writing and formal grammatical rule. Hissing and moaning augur an access of emotion that is prior to or beyond rational expression. In *vox articulata illiterata*, affective experience breaks through the limits of formal concept, perhaps because of its intensity. This is why such signifying but unscriptable plosions litter the *Inferno*, where bepooped flatterers “moan” (*nicchiare*) continuously, and the suicides-turned-trees, who can only speak when their “articles” are broken apart, “hiss” out words (*gemere*) in pain through the wounds in the bark.⁵ *Gemitus*, Priscian’s example of *vox articulata illiterata* and repeated here in Dante’s Italian by *geme*, can also apply to animal noises, just as Priscian’s hisses (*sibili*) can apply to snakes. The sounds on the one hand are sub-linguistic, on a par with beast noises, and on the other, para-linguistic, transcending language. The desert fathers “hiss” at the devil with holy noise,⁶ as if in search of a language beyond all *partes orationis* and linguistic rule, subsuming all languages within it.

⁵ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, ed. and trans. Charles S. Singleton, 3 vols. in 6 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 1:18.103 for flatterers; 1:13.41 for suicides.

⁶ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 90.

Priscian's third category is a sound that you can write down but that has no meaning: *vox literata inarticulata (confusa)* ("scriptable, unintelligible speech"). These are sounds that have the appearance of words but that are semantically without definition: we have already considered *grust* and *blomby*. Priscian offers animals noises as examples – the frog's *coax* ("ribbit, ribbit") and the crow's *cra* ("caw, caw"); others might be "miaow," "bow-wow," "tweet tweet." It is debatable whether this third category is reserved exclusively for animal sounds, but it would seem that it is here where we may place the voice-noises of Nimrod in *Inferno* 31: "Raphèl mà amècche zabì almi." You can write it, you can pronounce it; this makes it *vox literata*; the only problem is that it means nothing, *vox inarticulata*. Nimrod, father of Babel it is said, may once have been human but he stands for an abuse of rational discourse that pulls language down to and below the base level of blood-stupid animality.

The fourth and last category is unintelligible, unscriptable speech: *vox illiterata inarticulata*. Priscian's examples are "rattling" (*crepitus*) and "roaring" or "crying" (*mugitus*). As with the second category of *vox illiterata articulata*, he offers only generic descriptions because the specific instance is unwritable. Priscian seems to refer to silly noises here, and to sounds such as belching and crying that have neither phonetic valence nor semantic denotation. What would also fit the definition of *vox illiterata inarticulata* is precisely the kind of non-word, the voice-fart or raspberry, which the squad of demons makes to Malacoda in *Inferno* 21. Dante's hell resounds with *voces illiteratae inarticulatae*. Here, in the "outer darkness" (*tenebras exteriores*) of the eighth and ninth circles of hell, there is "fletus, et stridor dentium" (Matt. 8.12) ("weeping, and gnashing of teeth"). In *vox illiterata inarticulata* we find voice-noise proper, the inverse of rational language, contrary of *verbum*. This is demonic *clamor* that stops reason in its tracks.

Voice-noise is not simply any sound made by the mouth that isn't a part of speech but ultimately violates rational discourse; as *ngust* and *glbombr* demonstrate, it may even look like speech. Priscian himself is in hell for solecism of a different bodily opening, that is, for the moral "noise" of sodomy. Dante assigns him to the seventh circle, that of the violent. Priscian's sodomy exhibits not lust essentially, but violence done to nature. Actions *contra naturam* are conceived as violent; the violent and the natural are contraries of each other; hence we contrast a "natural" death from a "violent." The opposition is echoed elsewhere by Laurent Joubert, who refers to the "natural" diastolic and systolic motion of the heart, which although highly energetic is not violent (p. 32);⁷ and by *De Secretis Mulierum*, which refers to the violent disruption of a body's natural motion.⁸ Violence is a literal de-variation, a turning away of something from its intended, proper course and *telos*. Just as there is a proper way to make meaningful words, so there is a proper manner of sexual congress in

⁷ "...ils sont dits naturels: car il n'y ha point de violance...." Laurent Joubert, *Traité du Ris* (Paris: Nicholas Chesneau, 1579), 53.

⁸ "& hoc est naturale respectu coitus, quia ille coitus est naturale. Est tamen quasi violentus respectu fluxus naturalis menstuum," *Albertus Magni De Secretis Mulierum libellus, Scholiis Auctus* (Argentorati [i.e. Strassburg]: sumptibus haerdum Lazari Zetzner, 1625), 23.

accordance with its proper objective. “Noise” derails voice-sounds from their goal of meaningful utterance.

Musical Noise

In like manner, noise does violence to music. Harmony is *concordia discors*, a careful proportion of sounds different but compatible. “Consonance is the concord of mutually dissimilar pitches brought together into one.”⁹ Dissonance occurs not only when incompatible pitches are brought together but also when two sounds, each of which trying to dominate the other, percuss and intermingle unpleasantly in the ear.¹⁰ Sheer volume is not in itself the offense, which lies rather in the insubordinacy of lesser notes.

In a cosmos of singing spheres, silence itself represents sound that earthly ears cannot register. “The ears of mortals are filled with this sound, but they are unable to hear it.”¹¹ Everything that moves makes sound naturally, and apparent absence of sound is no more than a hidden presence. If silence be a kind of utterance, noise prevents one from hearing the sound of silence; it disallows stillness. It is not silence that is the other of sound, but noise. The decorous silence of women and peasants is justified ideologically not as muzzled absence of *vox* but as musical undertone and tacit assent to the clear voice of authority.

Consider the bagpipe, which was notoriously loud: Marion speaks proudly of the noise (“le bruit”) Robin makes with his musette (“se musete”), a small bagpipe.¹² A marginal from the fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter depicts a bizarre conglomerate of man and an instrument that appears part two-legged animal and part bagpipe, with a human face at the ends of the chanter and the drone.¹³ The regal head that plays the chanter blows upon a shawm-like pipe, of discrete proportion; but the drone end has turned into a peasant blowing a huge shawm, cheeks bulging. The legs make the bagpipe into an animal, with the chanter as the head and the drone as the butt. The shawm is the loudest of medieval wind-instruments, and the large shawm gives off the deepest and loudest sound of all.¹⁴ In its capacity here as a drone, it produces continuous sound. We get the

⁹ Boethius, 1.3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.8.

¹¹ Macrobius. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl. 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 74.

¹² Adam de la Halle, *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion*, ed. and trans. Shira I. Schwam-Baird (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 8.

¹³ *The Luttrell Psalter ... From the Additional Manuscript 42130 in the British Museum* (London: Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum, 1932), fol. 185v.

¹⁴ David Munrow, *Instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 8-9.

message: thunderous and incessant wind issues forth from the churlish backside of our biped bagpipe; once allowed *vox*, peasants threaten the dominion of their sovereign betters with their clamor. To further clinch the association between noisy pipes and exploding butts, the word used for the bass shawm, the *bombard*, is related etymologically to Latin *bombulum* (“little fart,” “farticle”), and to Middle English *bomme*, which, says John of Trevisa, means “anus.”¹⁵

The farting body is a popular image of noise as harmony gone awry, and is depicted frequently as a musical instrument, whether wind, percussive, or string. John in the *Summoner’s Tale* is carried to the fartwheel with his distended belly like a small drum, “stif and toght/ As any tabour.”¹⁶ In *Le Pet au Villain*, the peasant’s belly is “stretched tight like a zither” (“li tent com corde a citole”).¹⁷ And in response to the raspberry that the Malebranche blow, Malacoda makes “a bugle of his ass” (“del cul fatto trombetta” – *Inferno* 21.139). Hieronimus Bosch’s early sixteenth-century triptych about fallen humanity, the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, features an entire musical sequence in its infernal right panel. Here is some confounded sinner’s upended butt serving as both music-stand for and score of a part-song led by a croaking toad decked out as a church precentor. Other examples of such scannel butt-noises include playing the fife through the fundament—who knows, maybe rather skillfully. The point is that the violence is effected by displacement from the proper bodily orifice. It lies not in excess or defect but in possessing, literally, the wrong end.

The fart seems automatically dissonant. Hippocrates mentions that wind should pass without noise or breaking, suggesting that the audible fart is both aesthetically and medically undesirable.¹⁸ Yet there exist a surprising number of scattered allusions to performers who can regulate their intestinal wind to pleasing rhythms and pitches, turning farting into music. Augustine mentions certain prodigies that “have such command of their bowels, that they can break wind continuously at will, so as to produce the effect of singing.”¹⁹ Glossing the passage, Vives in the sixteenth century attests to having himself witnessed such a marvel.²⁰ *Activa Vita* in *Piers Plowman* offers a strange juxtaposition of musical abilities in lamenting:

Ac for I kan neiþer taboure no trompe ne telle no gestes,

¹⁵ *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus*, ed. M.C. Seymour and others (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 7.49.

¹⁶ Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, III D 2267-68.

¹⁷ *Le pet au villain*, in *The French Fabliau B.N. MS 837*, ed. Raymon Eichmann and John DuVal (New York: Garland, 1985), 2.242-45 (line 38).

¹⁸ Hippocrates. *Works*, trans. W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 2.24-25.

¹⁹ *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed and trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), XIV.24.

²⁰ Referenced by Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin, 1991), 115.

Farten ne fyþelen at festes, ne harpen,
 lape ne iogle ne gentilliche pipe,
 Ne neiþer saille ne saute, ne syngne wiþ þe gyterne.²¹ B.231-34

An illustrated scroll set from the Japanese Kamakura period (1185-1333) depicts the story of Oribe, a man who performed fart dances for the entertainment of the aristocracy, and how he tricked his impoverished neighbor Tōda who tried to mimic the master farter, but ended up soiling and disgracing himself.²² The *Tech Midchúarda*,²³ a twelfth-century diagram of the banqueting hall of Tara where the High King of Ireland resided, depicts a group of *braigeteri* (“farters”) along with other entertainers, such as the king’s jester, hornblowers, and jugglers. Though generally regarded as low-end entertainment, farting nonetheless kept kings happy, and required some skill. Rabelais recounts how Panurge when “getting up, gave a fart (“un pet”), a leap (“un sault”), and a whistle (“un sublet”), and joyously cried out ‘Long live Pantagruel!’”²⁴ Since Pantagruel immediately tries to do the same thing but shits himself, we might infer that the action required some acrobatic ability; certainly Oribe’s neighbor overreached himself disastrously. Panurge’s hat-trick was apparently no fiction, for it occurs in English land tenure as feudal rent. Meet Roland the Farter.

Seriantia que quondam fuit Rollandi le Pettour in Hemingston in comitatu Suff’, pro qua debuit facere die Natali Domini singulis annis coram domino rege unum saltum et siffletum et unum bumbulum, que alienata fuit per particulas subscriptas.²⁵

The following (lands), which formerly were held of Roland the Farter in Hemingston in the county of Suffolk, for which he was obliged to perform every year on the birthday of our Lord before his master the king, one jump, one whistle, and one fart, were alienated in accordance with these specific requirements.

²¹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition of the A, B, C, and Z Versions*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: Longman, 1995).

²² *Tales of Tears and Laughter: Short Fiction of Medieval Japan*, trans. Virginia Skord (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 157-67.

²³ See Alan J. Fletcher, *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 10ff.

²⁴ François Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*. ed. Mireille Huchon avec François Moreau (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 2.27 (p. 310).

²⁵ *Liber Feodorum. The Book of Fees, Commonly Called Testa de Nevill: Part 2, A.D. 1242-1293*, ed. H.C.M. Lyte (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1923), 1174.

In a separate entry, we learn that Roland performed his *saltus, si flus et pettus* before Henry II of England, but that for whatever reason—death, a broken leg, or having simply run out of steam—his lands were alienated, or transferred to another tenant, in a charter ratified by Henry.²⁶ These subsequent vassals, unable or unwilling to pay in Roland’s kind, paid hard cash to the tune of 15s. Roland’s *bombulum* comes from the same Latin verb *bombinare* (“to buzz”) that gives us the *bombard*, and also occurs much earlier in Latin as a musical term for a toot on a flute.²⁷ In its own way, the *bombulum* is a joyful noise, the song of Roland.

Despite the ubiquity of the farting butt as metaphor for violated harmony, it was possible, from Ireland to Japan, and for over a thousand years, to savor noisy farts as music. The well-tempered intestine can sing in harmony with the rhythms of the universe. In the syncopated fart, *musica humana* and *musica mundana* conjoin. Medieval music theory insists upon the inherent rationality of harmony, and thus the syncopated fart can be thought of as a sound that in a way facilitates thought. We may not be able to think with our butts, but a musical butt may help us think.

The Language of Battle

Also to make them within afraid, they made a marveylous great bombard of l. fote of lengthe, shotyng stone of a marveylous weyght; and whan this bombarde shot, it might well be harde by day tyme fyve myle of, and by nyght ten, and it made suche a noyse in the goynge, as though all the dyvels of hell had bene in the way.”²⁸

Thus observes Froissart of Europe’s new weapon in the fourteenth century, the cannon. Echoing the sense of wonderment at such a din, an observer, fighting for Joan of Arc, remarks how “it was a marvel to hear the noise and din of the canon and culverins” (“c’était merveille d’ouïr le bruit et le vacarme des canons et coulevrines”).²⁹

And what better way to describe this new technological boom box than in terms of flatulence? The bombard, already a term for the bass shawm,³⁰ and reminiscent both of Latin *bombulum* (“fartlet”) and of Middle English *bomme* (“butt”), now also denotes the cannon.³¹ For Furetière, *la bombe* derives

²⁶ *Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III, A.D. 1330-1333* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1898), 187.

²⁷ St. Jerome, “Epistola 23 ad Dardanum, de diversis generis musicorum,” in *Patrologiae Latinae: Cursus Completus*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Garnier, 1865), 30.0220C.

²⁸ *The Chronicle of Froissart, translated by Sir John Bourchier Lord Berners* (London: David Nutt, 1901), 3.332.

²⁹ Régine Pernoud, *Jeanne d’Arc par elle-même et par ses témoins* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 161.

³⁰ *Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1901), *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2482.

³¹ Lydgate refers to “gunne nor bumbard,” in *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS ES 121 (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 1.1312.

from Latin “bombus, crepitus, aut sibilus ani” (“whistle from the anus”).³² Copland’s Gill of Brentford, gripped with belly pains, “lift vp her buttock somewhat a wry/And like a handgun, she let a fart fly.”³³

According to William Dwight Whitney’s *Century Dictionary* (1889), the petard was an engine of war used to blow in a door or gate or to form a breach in a wall or defense. Its first recorded use is from the sixteenth century, and it derives from Old French *péter* (“to break wind”). Made of iron or bronze, the petard was a kind of bomb, shaped like a short cannon, packed with about seven pounds of gunpowder, wadded, attached to a wooden board which itself was then attached to the surface to be blown in; then, lastly, the fuse was lit. The *-ard* ending, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, denotes “one who does to excess.” Of great popularity in the sixteenth century, the suffix was just the ticket to describe this noisy explosive. The pet-ard meant something like “Old Fart Butt,” and carried the same derogatory innuendo as did “dotard,” “drunkard,” “coward,” “laggard,” “stinkard” “wizard,” and, worst of all, “Spaniard.” The proverbial “being hoist with one’s own petard” thus means any or all of the following: being blown up by your own bomb; destroyed by your own devices against others; stunk out by your own fart.

Roland held his lands in serjeanty, a form of lay tenure below the knight’s fee but higher than socage. Central to the notion of serjeanty, whether grand serjeanty (*magna serjeantia*) or petty or petit serjeanty (*parva serjeantia*), is service, which is rendered in person to the king himself, and which generally is given in defense of the country, although domestic or non-military services were also required.³⁴ A tenant by petit serjeanty was expected to provide the king with warlike implements (amounting to half a mark or less), which are offered to the king in person. The *Magna Carta* states that under petit serjeanty, the tenant must provide the king with “knives, arrows, or the like” (“cultellos, vel sagittas, vel hujusmodi”);³⁵ and in the fifteenth century, Lyttleton claims that:

Tenure by petit serjeanty is, where a man holds his lands of our lord the king, to yield to him yearly a bow, or a sword, or a dagger, or a knife, or a lance, or a pair of gloves of mail, or a pair of gilt spurs, or an arrow, or divers arrows,/ or to yield such other small things (*petitz choses*) belonging to war.³⁶

³² Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (La Haye: Chez Arnout, 1694).

³³ Robert Copland, “Iyl of Braintford’s Testament,” in *Poems*, ed. Mary Carpenter Erler (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pages 164-186 (lines 154-55).

³⁴ See definitions in F.W. Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 23-39.

³⁵ *An Historical Essay on the Magna Charta of King John, to which are added the Great Charter in Latin and English*, ed. Richard Thomson (London: J. Major, 1829), p.80 (§37).

³⁶ Lyttleton, *His Treatise of Tenures, in French and English*, ed. T.E. Tomlins (New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 191.

Perhaps no pun was intended between Roland's *pet* and the demands of *petit* serjeanty, but, given both the analogy between the fart and early artillery and the feudal requirement of payment in defense of the realm, it is not inconceivable that Roland's routine involved turning himself into a one-man-army of a flying, farting, sibilating projectile. Although *bombard* as a word occurs too late to pun on Roland's *bombulum*, instances do exist of much earlier acquaintance with the concept of the handgun.³⁷ The natural defenses of the Bonnancon, drawn in the thirteenth-century Hereford *mappa mundi*, which defends itself by squirting boiling diarrhea up to a range of three acres,³⁸ anticipate later illustrations of cannon with remarkable exactness.³⁹ The steam-driven *sufflator* or *aeolipilae*, tellingly fashioned in human form, came to acquire military as well as domestic application (White, 90-92). There exist also the projectile possibilities of the *trebuchet*, a sling-beam used in warfare in currency in Europe during the twelfth century (White, 102); maybe Roland's *saltus* mimicked the trajectory of a human cannonball. The exploding butt seems a natural image for aggressive assault. Noise is itself a weapon, accosting a body with external force, reducing totalities to shattered parts, bursting eardrums, and breaking asunder. Noise spells danger to physical integrity.

Domestic Harmony

The ear enjoys a relatively privileged position on the hierarchy of the senses. Second only to sight, hearing belongs only to locomotive animals. Hearing and sight require distance between sensing subject and sense object. By these senses, we know the world from a distance, and extend the self into the domain of the beyond. Beneath them, Aristotle places smell, and lastly taste and touch, most fundamental sense of all.⁴⁰ What characterizes tactile and gustatory sensation is the need for direct contact with its object, thus doing away with the critical space between self and other. Noise violates the ideal distance between the hearing subject and object, forcing sound too close, to deleterious and "noyous" effect on the ear, and demoting hearing to the level of the haptic. This is exactly what happens in *De Porcelet*, when the sexually overworked husband, asked to perform once more, plants

³⁷ Referenced in Lynn White, Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 98-99.

³⁸ Scott D. Westrem, *The Hereford Map: A Transcription and Translation of the Legends with Commentary* (Turnout: Brepols, 2001), 110-11.

³⁹ See the illustration of cannon at the Siege of Orléans in the Vigils of Charles VII, in the English translation of Pernoud, *Joan of Arc By Herself and Her Witnesses*, trans. Edward Hyams (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1994), plate 17.

⁴⁰ "On Sense and Sensible Objects," in *Parva Naturalia*, ed and trans. W.S. Hett (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 205-83.

a fart (*1 pet*) in his wife's lap, claiming that is all that remains:⁴¹ that is, he farts on her, turning auditory sensation into tactile. The "volume" of noise injuriously diminishes the "volume" of air that separates self from other, and compromises the interval between bodies required for an ideal community. Noise as violated space informs one of medieval literature's favorite comic themes: marriage. The domestic scenarios of fabliaux and such comic literature generally feature either lesser gentry or peasants, in other words people who live at closer quarters than spacious castles. In the fifteenth-century burlesque, *La Farce du Pect*,⁴² the space of the home is violated by the noise and stink of Jehannette's fart, which leads to a courtroom battle.

Hubert is agitating for his dinner, but his wife first needs help with moving a large bundle of cloth in order to set the table. Hubert won't oblige, and the burdened Jehannette, bending too low, cuts a fart. "Sus donc! O que ay-je ouy sonner?" ("Woah! What did I just hear?"). Jehannette plays dumb, speculating that the sound may have been something small dropping or breaking. But in the interval of their short exchange, the stink has spread and Hubert is able to answer his own question. "Par le sang de dieu, c'est ung pet" ("God's blood, it's a fart").

Precisely because it requires some degree of direct contact between subject and object, smell is a more intimate sensation than hearing, and rotten smells more intimate again. Thomas Norton notes that where sweet smells diffuse more easily because they are more pure, stinks are heavy, being weighted down with matter.

Al swete smyllyng thing hath more purite,
 And is more spiritual then stynkyng may be;
 wherfore it is in Ayre more penetratife
 And more extendible, & is also to lyfe
 More acceptable, as frende to nature.⁴³

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It is particularly gross to inhale a fart, for it contains bodily waste. Hubert's knowledge of her fart becomes progressively intimate as it unites with his flesh, and the recognition itself constitutes the trauma he claims to have suffered.

Ung pet...dont j'eus si peur
 Que encores le cul me hallette.
 Et moy, qui veulx ma maison nette,
 Sans y souffrir aucune ordure,

⁴¹ A. de Courde de Montaignon, ed. *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux* (Paris: Libraire des Bibliophiles, 1880), 4.145.

⁴² *La Farce Nouvelle et fort joyeuse du pect*, in *Ancien Théâtre françois ou collection des ouvrages dramatiques les plus remarquables depuis les mystères jusqu'à Corneille*, ed. Viollot le Duc (Paris: Jannet, 1854), 1.94-110.

⁴³ Thomas Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy*, ed. John Reidy, EETS 272 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Je vueil qu'il (me) répare l'injure,
Que m'a faict[e] en ma maison.

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a fart...at which I took such a fright that my ass is still quivering. And I, who like my house clean, who allows no filth, want she who cut it in my house to make good the damage.

In the Procurer's presentation, this becomes formal grounds for complaint. The fart was so sneaky that it made him quake from terror ("il en tressaillit de grand peur") and befouled his home (p. 104). But the judge's final decision is not what Hubert wanted to hear. Since husband and wife are one flesh and substance ("une mesme chose"), "it follows that you cut it" ("il fault que l'avez faict"). "What one brews one must drink" ("Ce qu'il brasse il le fault boire" – p. 107). The judge's proverb exists in a more graphic form no doubt not lost on the audience: "Whoever brews shit drinks shit" ("Ki merde brace merde beive").⁴⁴ Hubert took Jehanette's body, ass and all, as his own on his wedding day, and now he must endure her farts as if he had cut them himself. Victim though he thinks himself to be, Hubert has been thoroughly hoist with his own petard. Old French has the happy distinction of differentiating between the audible fart (*le pet*) and the silent (*la vesse*).⁴⁵ Whether Jehanette farted noisily or silently ("a peté ou vescu" – p. 108), Hubert must endure it patiently. Within the marital space, air is common, and the distinction between noise and stink, hearing and smelling evaporates. Hubert has had to *sentir* Jehanette's fart (p. 99), a verb that means not only to smell, but also to palpate, to touch, and hence to embrace and to make love. The judge obliges him to "have his part" ("avoir part à") of her fart (pp. 108, 106), another phrase that implies sexual intimacy. Poor Hubert has had carnal knowledge of Jehanette's backside, not only by virtue of her wind but also, as it transpires, on their wedding night, when in the pitch black the confused groom was unable to navigate the "proper" course of the marital act.

Hubert's own buttocks, he claims, are still quivering from fear at the vibration of Jehanette's sonic boom. The physics of resonance requires enough space between two bodies for reverberation to occur, yet not enough for the sympathetic echo to weaken. In the extimate space between the two, Jehanette's reboant fart is of such force that it catalyzes not pleasing sonority but a shuddering to the point of distress and injury. Noise not only pulverizes through collision but also causes a body to shake loose its own joints and "articles" into pieces.

Jehanette creates noise at both ends. Where her butt loses control in the kitchen, her mouth proves unruly in the courtroom, obliging the Procurer to silence her repeatedly: "Merde! Taisez-vous." ("Shit! Shut up" – p. 103). She inherits her runaway mouth from Eve, for, as one fabliau attests, after God created her, the devil added some finishing touches, including an auditory-turned-tactile flourish

⁴⁴ Joseph Morawski, ed., *Proverbes français antérieurs au XV^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1925), 72/1989.

⁴⁵ Furetière defines *la vesse* as "Vent que lâche le derriere sans éclat, & qui est d'ordinaire fort puant."

of a fart on her tongue, “which is why women are always yapping” (“por ce a fame tant de jangle”).⁴⁶ Insubordinate noise destroys the shapeliness of sound, heralding incontinent loss of sonic control.

The clustering of wind and excrement within marriage provides a satiric commentary upon the hallowed and exclusive institution that declares two creatures from different families and communities to be one flesh. With low cunning, *La Farce* fixes on the one reminder guaranteed never to lose its potency that the other person is most definitely not yourself: their intestinal waste. There can be few more intimate signals of otherness. Most personal and prolific of bodily products, its daily presence acts as a constant reminder that your spouse is not you, that the singleness of marriage constitutes within itself the inescapable and perpetual presence of the other. Yet if your beloved’s fart provides a deafening and choking reminder that your one flesh is actually two, it also affirms that difference begins and ends with your spouse’s body, that here is all the otherness there is in the world. The spousal zephyr constitutes the limit of desire and disgust. Marriage, although at one level an exclusive relationship set apart from all other societal relationships, is at another level a microcosm of community, an encounter that sets the constitutive limit on the encounter with the other.

La Farce is only one of a number of French narratives that center on spousal waste. *De Porcelet*, *La Crote*, and Gautier le Leu’s *De deus Vilains* all feature anal expulsion as the occasion of marital hostility or revenge. Although it has traditionally been in medieval romance, with its cult of affect and passionate love, that the emergence of individual consciousness, of a private sense of self has been situated, it is in these fabliaux that subjectivity is critically tested in a literal space soiled by shit and farts. Chaucer’s speculation about May’s private thoughts as she emerges from the privy, having read Damien’s billet-doux, only to be immediately required by January for sex, aptly conveys the violation of psychic space through the sordid association with the *necessarium*.

Despite the fact that there was no word in Old French or Middle English for a married “couple” in the sense we know it, yet the nameless pair stood at the very heart of the feudal relation and of the clan.⁴⁷ Traditionally, a knight realizes his existential potential in *fin’ amor*, whether that love is adulterous or premarital. Once knight and lady become a “couple,” they vanish linguistically, only reentering romance when adultery is in the air. In the fabliaux, the married couple is in the foreground; although many feature adultery, in many others the violation of marital space is exclusively excremental, a question of hygiene rather than morals. Here, there is no “perturbynge of air”⁴⁸ by an adulterous third party; the *locus amoenus* of marriage, which by the thirteenth century had been officially recognized as a sacrament, is silently, windlessly unsullied. Here, spousal excrement is ingested like a wafer. Here personal space, intimacy, dignity and acceptable behavior go on the block. In a critical climate where the “marriage debate” has been bypassed by competing and alternative sexualities, the broken air of a spouse’s fart compels us to reconsider the “sweete noyse”⁴⁹ of

⁴⁶ *Du Con Qui Fu Fez A La Besche*, in Eichmann, 44-47 (line 66).

⁴⁷ Dominique Barthélemy, “Kinship,” in Georges Duby, ed. *Revelations of the Medieval World*, vol 2 of *A History of Private Life*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117.

⁴⁸ Chaucer, CT III.D.2254.

⁴⁹ Chaucer, CT IX.H.300.

matrimony. Hubert wonders what the noise is; then he wonders where it came from (“je ne scay dont il peut venir” – p. 95). Along with smell, hearing is a primal sense by which we register danger to our existence: “is what I hear, this noise, this broken air, going to kill me?” This is Hubert’s fundamental question, and by it, we establish fundamental relation between self and the world.

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