

Lars Porsena
or
The Future of Swearing
and Improper Language

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Lars Porsena

OF RECENT YEARS IN ENGLAND there has been a noticeable decline of swearing and foul language, and this, except at centres of industrial depression, shows every sign of continuing, until a new shock to our national nervous system, a European war on a large scale or widespread revolutionary disturbances at home may (or may not) revive the habit of swearing, simultaneously with that of praying. While, therefore, obscene and blasphemous tongues are temporarily idle, it would be well to inquire intelligently into the nature and necessity of their employment: a ticklish theme and one seldom publicly treated except in comminations from orthodox pulpits. It is to be hoped that this essay will steer its difficult

course without private offence to the reader as without public offence to the Censor.

To begin with a few necessary common-places. The chief strength of the oath in Christian countries, and indeed everywhere, is that it is forbidden by authority, and the Mosaic injunction against taking the name of Jehovah in vain must mark the beginning of our research. This commandment seems to have had a double force, recording in the first place a taboo against the mention, except on solemn occasions, of the tribal god's holy name (for so among certain savage tribes it is still considered unlucky to use a man's real name, often only known to himself and the priest), and in the second place a taboo against the misuse of even a decent periphrasis of the god's name: for the act of calling him to witness any feat or condition, or the summons to curse or destroy an enemy, must involve

elaborate purifications or penalties. Any vain appeal to God to witness or punish a triviality was therefore forbidden as lessening not only the prestige of religion but also the legal dues of the priestly commissioners of the oaths. Now, however, that the economic interest has dwindled, and priesthood has been shorn of temporal powers, the vain oath is no longer punishable with stoning or with the stake – it is regarded merely as a breach of the peace. “Goddam you, sir, for your interference” spoken to a railway company official is not liable to greater penalties than “To the pigs with dirty King William” spoken in Belfast. Though the railwayman is given credit for possible religious fanaticism, and though the goddam-er is formally reminded of the solemn nature of the oath when he kisses the Book in the witness box, the Almighty is left to avenge the spiritual fault personally.

The taboo on vain mention of God or gods is also extended to the divine mysteries, to the sacraments and sacred writings, and to the human representatives of Heaven where they are permitted direct communion with the Absolute. In Catholic countries, Saints and Prophets are, therefore, used for swearing in a low key, and it has meant a serious lessening of the dignity of the Almighty in England that Protestantism and Dissent have removed these valuable intermediaries from objugation as from adoration. In Catholic countries, too, the Bible is not vulgarly broadcast, and an oath by the Great Chained Word of God is resonant and effective; while in England the prolific output of sixpennyworths and even penn'orths of the Holy Scriptures from secular presses has further weakened the vocabulary of the forceful blasphemer. The triumph of Protestantism is perhaps best shown by the

decline into vapidty of “By George!” the proudest oath an Englishman could once swear; for the fact is we have lost all interest in our Patron Saint. It has been stated with detail and persistence that in the late summer of 1918 an Australian mounted unit sensationally rediscovered the actual bones of St George – not George of Cappodocia, but the other one who slew the Dragon: they were brought to light by the explosion of a shell in the vault of a ruined church. The officer in command sent a cable to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, inviting them to house the holy relics. After some delay, the Dean and Chapter formally regretted the serious overcrowding of their columns; for, of course, though they could not very well mention it, St George was a bloody German. So the Saint was lost again by the disgusted Australians, this time beyond rescue. Or so one version of the story has it.

The other version, more attractive if less authenticated, suggests that the Dean relented later and permitted the relics to be smuggled into the Abbey under the thin disguise of *The Unknown Warrior*, thereby avoiding offence to anti-Popish feeling.

Undistinguished as the oath by St George has become, he has at any rate had the honour of outlasting all his peers. Where is there an Englishman who, mislaying his purse or his pipe, will threaten it in the name of St Anthony? or blackguarding a cobbler for making a bad repair to his boots, will swear by the holy last of St Crispin that, if that cobbler does not do the job again properly, he will have half a pound of his own blunt brads forced down his lying throat? And whom has England got to match the Pope as a swearing stock? Once in a public house a young Italian and a middle-aged Londoner were arguing

politics. The Italian paid a warm tribute to the Vatican and its works. "Oh, to hell with the Pope!" remarked the Englishman. "And to hell," replied the furious Italian, upsetting the glasses with a blow of his fist, "and to hell with your Archbishop of Canterbury!" The Englishman swallowed the insult agreeably, but expostulated on the waste of good liquor.

Bound up with the taboo on the mention of God, of Heaven His throne and Earth His footstool, and of all His other charges and minions, is the complementary taboo on the Devil, His ministers and His prison house. At one time the vain invocation of the Devil was an even more dangerous misdemeanour than the breach of the third Commandment. God, though he would not hold him guiltless who took His Name in vain, might forgive an occasional lapse; but the Devil, if ever called in professionally, would not fail to charge

heavily for His visit. However, since the great Victorian day when an excited working man came rushing out of the City church where Dean Farrar was preaching the gospel and shouted out to his friends at the public-house corner: "Good news! Old Farrar says there's no 'ell", the taboo has yearly weakened. "That dreadful other place", as Christina respectfully called it in the deathbed scene of Butler's *Way of all Flesh*, is now seldom dwelt upon in the home pulpit, though the Law still formally insists on it as true because deterrent. One regretfully hears that the threat of hell's quenchless flames and the satyro-morphic view of Satan are now chiefly used for export purposes to Kenya and the Congo Basin, as a cement to the bonds of Empire.

There is no surer way of testing the current of popular religious opinion than by examining the breaches of the taboos in