
INTRODUCTION

Reading the Riddles of Public Silences

“A certain philosopher, asked whether he was staying silent because he lacked words or because he was foolish, responded to those talking: ‘No foolish person is able to stay silent’” (Philosophus quidam aliis loquentibus et, interrogatus utrum propter inopiam verborum aut quia stultus esset taceret, respondit: “Nemo stultus tacere potest”).¹ John of Mirfield (d. 1407), an Augustinian canon attached as chaplain to St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, Smithfield, recalls this anecdote as he knits together an entry on silence in his late fourteenth-century *Florarium Bartholomei* (An anthology from Bartholomew’s), a vast compendium, by topic, of moral and medical material copied well down into the fifteenth century. In the anecdote, someone’s silence in a social situation puzzles and disturbs at least one of the speakers. Although unsure of what to make of it, he proposes two causes: lack of eloquence or stupidity, the elastic word *stultus* suggesting social ineptitude, fatuity, lack of consideration, and/or mental limitation. The wise man’s pithy rejoinder negates both possibilities. Its brevity indicates rhetorical skill; its acuity, considered social analysis derived from experience. Moreover, by choosing not to argue against his interrogator, which might entail verbal confrontation and a fair amount of speech, he displays, as his silence has, a considered choice to be taciturn, to prefer silence or brief and infrequent utterances to loquacity. As John of Mirfield and other moral writers of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries tell this anecdote, silence elicits a precipitous but “knowing” response: it can only be due to deficiency, mental or social. Yet the reply indicates the very opposite: silence while others are speaking may spring from strength of mind and character. However, as a sign, just as words are, silence may be misconstrued readily, especially by

the loquacious, as in John's anecdote. Of what, in any given situation, is silence a sign?

The philosopher of this anecdote cagily uses the social situation in which he finds himself, his companions' loquacity, and his questioner's presumptuous reading of his silence as an occasion to provoke the talkers to think about both silence and speech. His very terseness forces his auditors to puzzle out what his reply might mean and apply its significance to themselves. Is he simply defending himself from a false interpretation of his silence? (I'm not a fool because fools can't stay silent.) Is he impugning his questioner? (You're a fool because you're unable to keep your dicey conjectures to yourself.) Is he indicating that the loquacity of all the speakers discloses that each one of them is *stultus*: socially obtuse, fatuous, or lacking a quick wit? Or is he suggesting that wisdom entails knowing the value of silence and learning when and how to practice it, even in company? However his auditors might interpret his rejoinder, it may enable them to see silence, and to see speech, in a new light, reconsidering why others might remain silent, whether they possess the powers to interpret the silences of others, and even perhaps whether silence is a response to what they are saying. He has turned the tables on his interrogator, becoming the wise one, the one who takes control of a situation and makes a statement that will be remembered.

Silence, of course, is necessary for conversation itself to take place. Erving Goffman, a pioneer of Conversation Analysis, notes that potential speakers routinely remain silent for a time out of deference to others so that they may speak or continue to speak.² Beyond this basic function, silence, like speech, is a mode of communication with many functions, as modern theorists of communication insist. Indeed, strategically using silence while others are speaking may further the silent one's communicative purposes.³ It may influence the course of speech in political, forensic, and social situations: in debate, consultation, trials, verbal assaults, and casual conversation. It may enable people to accomplish what they desire: listening to discern the character and motives of those who are speaking, learning from speakers, preserving integrity, implying certainty or superiority, ducking hostility, cloaking feelings or thoughts, preserving secrets, seizing others' attention, shunning conflict with the powerful. Silence for them is not simply an act of restraint. It is a good that offers opportunities to the person who chooses it. Yet what silence means in any given situation, what the silent are communicating with the sign of silence, let alone what they are trying to achieve with

it, is difficult to fathom because of its many functions. Does a silence indicate agreement or disagreement with what is being said? Does the person lack sufficient information to talk on the topic, or are they pondering carefully what to say? Are they bored or raptly attentive? Are they excluding themselves from a conversation they consider beneath them, even reprehensible, or are they concerned about avoiding saying anything that might hurt a speaker? These are some of the twenty potential meanings for a silence compiled by the sociolinguist Richard L. Johannesen, a list he considers far from exhaustive.⁴

Voluntary silences that may puzzle other characters and demand considered interpretation from readers and audiences punctuate at crucial points a wide range of late Middle English texts: dramatic, petitionary, satiric, autobiographical, visionary, dialogic, instructional, and advisory. Some silences, like that of John of Mirfield's wise man, provoke others present to come up with causes, revealing their own thoughts, feelings, emotions (culturally scripted and performed feelings), intentions, and cultural presuppositions.⁵ Thus, they set up a contrast in ways of life that invites ethical reflection and, perhaps, judgment by other characters and by readers or auditors. The Caiaphas, Anna, Pilate, and Herod of the York cycle of biblical plays are baffled by the silences and rare riddling utterances of the Jesus they attempt to interrogate. Yet they are also eager to interpret them. That contemporary high priest (in the eyes of Wycliffites) Archbishop Thomas Arundel interrogates the suspected heretic William Thorpe, only to be confronted by a mosaic of passionate speech and silences he does not readily grasp. In *Mum and the Sothsegger*, by contrast, Mum is all too ready to disclose why he stays silent in certain political, ecclesiastical, and legal situations. Yet his advocacy of the strategic silences that achieve his purposes is contested by other figures, constructing a conflict over opposed ethics of the place of silence in political life that invites readers to adjudicate their worth. In Thomas Hoccleve's "My Complaint" and "Dialogue," Thomas, the figure for the poet, considers the failed strategies of silence that he adopted in order to convey to others that his social conduct was no longer shattered by the "wilde infirmittee" of his past. Why have others misconstrued his silences as signs of mental illness? What might convince them that his feelings, emotions, and thoughts are no longer disordered? In other texts, like the third dream in *Piers Plowman*, silence escapes the attention of modern readers, occluding profound shifts in feelings, emotions, thoughts, and speech. If we neglect

to puzzle out the reasons for these silences, interpreting them as we do the poem's passionate debates, we can miss why Will the Dreamer adopts different ways of achieving his purposes, even how he does so. Even when an advisory text, like Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*, advocates prudent practices of silence, the political strategies and political capital created by silence may elude modern readers.

How can we interpret such silences, let alone weigh their social and ethical worth, when silence has so many functions and the texts themselves display how readily figures misconstrue what impels others to renounce speech? Silence while others are talking is, of course, not a thing in itself, as Tiziana Suarez-Nani reminds us. It depends on the speech surrounding it, whether it negates that or simply stands apart from it.⁶ For the Polish sociolinguist Adam Jaworski, a voluntary silence must be interpreted within the linguistic web in which it occurs: "the same interpretive processes apply to someone remaining meaningfully silent in discourse as to their speaking."⁷ Just as auditors who wish to speak are dependent on adjacent speech acts in the order in which they occur, so are observers of silences in political and social situations. Just as an auditor must infer from another's speech its genesis and illocutionary force (Does it deny, threaten, insult, or warn?), so must readers, although narrators may give them cues. To examine how potential speakers can make such assessments of speech acts, sociolinguists have adopted ethnographical principles that we can convert into questions for readers encountering silences in late medieval texts. What is the genre of speech at work when a figure refrains from speaking, and what are its conventions? The meaning of silence in a philosophical debate (if, for example, John of Mirfield's *philosophus* were in the midst of philosophers) might be quite different from that in a trial, casual conversation, or even a theological disputation. What is the setting? If a noblewoman is under lock and key in her bedroom, her silence in her lover's presence might signify something very different from her silence when they are dining in her father's hall. What are the political, forensic, or social roles of the participants, vocal and silent? What differences in power are created by these roles? A judge's silence might very well signify something quite different from the accused's silence. Within social roles, rank matters. A squire of low degree's silence before an earl's daughter he loves might convey something quite different than if he were of her social rank or higher. Given their roles and ranks, what does their society expect of them in such an exchange?⁸ The amount

an unmarried woman might speak to a man while walking down a street was governed by cultural prescriptions. Beyond these questions involving social context and the power relations it establishes, sociolinguists, like historians of emotions, invite us to ask tactical or attitudinal questions. What stance toward the speakers is the taciturn person conveying? Respect, hostility, disapproval, alienation, or one or more of many other stances?⁹ And, given how society describes—indeed, constructs—emotions for the silent one's community, what emotions are they expressing by that stance? Anger? Fear? Despair? Love? All of these questions about silence recognize that a silence, like an act of speech, is a social performance, one dependent on the presence of speech.¹⁰ That speech, of course, is fluid, as Conversation Analysis insists, for speakers constantly shift their footing by changing the kind or framework of the conversation, their stance, and even the self they are projecting within their social roles.¹¹

As these questions indicate, a society's norms governing both speech and silence become crucial for readers who come across, and take account of, silence in medieval narratives and plays. Such norms, as writers indicate, shape literary figures and implied readers, providing them with a moral language, tools for ethical reflection, and, to some extent, an identity shared to some degree with their society in general and to some degree with the differentiated social groups in which they are embedded. I am adopting the position of Seyla Benhabib and, behind her, of Hans-Georg Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics: that agents are embedded in communities that develop in them habits of practical reason and ethical understandings that they apply in specific situations.¹²

The most fruitful way to grasp how such norms construct silences in late medieval English narratives, plays, lyrics, and mirrors for princes is to examine instructional moral texts of several genres in circulation in England from the mid-thirteenth century to the late fifteenth: treatises on the ethics of speech; collections of *exempla* for preachers; treatises of advice for rulers and counselors; basic school texts; collections of wise sayings; alphabetized pastoral *distinctiones* with entries on silence or, more often, taciturnity as the inclination to stay silent. (The high number of entries on “Silencium” or “Taciturnitas” in these preaching aids is particularly striking because so many collections peter out about halfway through the alphabet after affording a large amount of space to the early letters.)¹³ Largely unedited and unprinted, these texts offer guidance on the ethics of silence, giving norms

and strategies for their societies as a whole and for specific social groups. They set forth the general circumstances that determine if it may be beneficial (*utilis*) to withhold speech, not only for the silent one but also for other persons, present or not (*bona* or *discreta* [thoughtfully determined] *taciturnitas*). They also spell out the circumstances under which it may be destructive (*mala* [evil], *indiscreta*, or *nimia* [excessive] *taciturnitas*). These texts are constructed from several cultural and ethical traditions, especially from Roman popular morality and Stoic texts as transmitted in late antique and early medieval collections of sayings and anecdotes (*dicta et facta*), from Jewish wisdom literature as learned from the Christian Bible, and from patristic texts, most often the writings of Pope Gregory I. Take for an example our anecdote about the wise man, as found in John of Mirfield's *distinctio* "De silencio." The writings of ancient wise men teach us, John claims at the outset, that no one can be fully virtuous or wise without moderating speech, that is, governing the tongue with an eye to certain norms (*modi*). This claim he confirms first with over twenty authoritative sayings (*sententiae*) attributed to Solomon, Sirach (Ben Sira), the apostle James, "Seneca" (really the Roman mime Publilius Syrus), several ancient philosophers, and the school text *Disticha Catonis*. Then he recalls several anecdotes from the *Vitae patrum* (Lives of the Fathers) about the arduous, sustained discipline that makes such control possible. Considerably more briefly, John turns to the dangers of excessive, evil, and thoughtless (*indiscreta*) taciturnity in one social group: clerics required to teach, preach, and correct the conduct of those who are committed to their charge. There he quotes just a few biblical and patristic *sententiae*. In a closing section, marked by a *paragraphus* (¶) in British Library MS. Royal 7.F.XI, he states a comprehensive, balanced practice of silence: the mouth ought to be so carefully guarded that it neither rejects life-giving teaching nor speaks freely what is ruinously destructive: "Ponenda est ergo ori custodia ut nec vitalem edificacionem clausum dampnet nec letalis perniciēs liberum sociatur egressum." To develop this, he gives our anecdote, adding to the presumptuous question (really a statement like so many "questions" after a lecture) and to the wise man's reply a second question and the wise man's reply to that. The new speaker reacts to the wise man's dictum that the foolish cannot remain silent. "Cui alter ergo: 'Cur solus tu linguam cohibes?' 'Quia,' inquit, 'dixisse me aliquando penituit; tacuisse numquam.'"¹⁴ (Then, another said to him: "Why are only you restraining the tongue?" "Because," he said, "to have spoken has grieved me

sometimes; to have kept silence, never.”) Careful not to construe the silence himself, this second speaker comprehends that this silence, alone as it is amid the conversation, is a deliberate act of restraint. And the wise man’s will to avoid the regret, even loss, that speech can precipitate is then reinforced immediately outside the anecdote by a well-known saying from the *Disticha Catonis*, which is embedded in a Middle English political satire we will take up in chapter 3: “Nam nulli tacuisse nocet; nocet esse locutum” (To have kept silence harms no one; to have spoken harms).¹⁵ Thus, John converts the wise man’s answer into an explicit preference for taciturnity as the inclination to keep silent in order to avoid harming anyone within, or even outside of, the immediate social circle.

As John of Mirfield’s *distinctio* reveals, moral writers supply their contemporaries (and those who follow) with both classical and scriptural authoritative material, the one reinforcing the other. With this material, they develop measures by which people may discern in specific situations whether speech should be avoided or embraced. Thus, they may learn to moderate their tongue, governing it by a *moderamen*, a means of control. Often formulated in terms of the consequences of speech and of silence, beneficial or destructive, these *modi* usually promote a self-protective ethic of caution, of initially restraining the tongue until the situation, the other speakers, one’s own emotional state, and the likely consequences of speaking (or not) have been assessed. Beyond this realm of practical rationality, moral writers also formulate norms in terms of potential speakers’ wills: of what they desire and what they detest, of what they are pursuing and what they are avoiding, and so, in part, of what emotions are assisting them in achieving what they seek.¹⁶ Intention, as always, matters in medieval moral thought. What ends do people have in mind when they choose to be silent? What do they seek to accomplish with their silences? Although moral writers often generalize about the will, emotions, and intentions, they may also apply general norms to the conduct of certain social groups. Clerical writers insist that the love of their fellow humans should guide all who consider speaking or remaining silent. Yet they also specifically condemn any cleric who, out of fear, remains silent when he could rebuke the sins of the rich and powerful, especially those in his pastoral care. Although all Christians were bound by charity (and by canon law) to rebuke sinful conduct in others in order to amend their fellows (the practice of fraternal correction), clerics were especially reprehensible for such silences because of their *officium*,

their chosen position in life that obligates them to teach and correct others.¹⁷ Finally, moral writers look to the consequences of acts of silence. What benefits or destructive effects do they bring for the agent, for others, for the community? A royal adviser's silence cloaking his own thinking from a rival at court would have very different consequences from his silence about a course of action against a national enemy that is decided on, but not yet executed, by the royal council and the king. Thus, the fundamental questions that are used, along with circumstances, to evaluate the moral nature and gravity of any act, including any speech act (Is that killing homicide or necessary self-defense? Are those words slander or just idle talk?) also apply to silence.¹⁸ Silence is as much a moral act requiring ethical reflection as speech. That is why moral writers, like the English compiler of the widely distributed *De lingua* (On the tongue; ca. 1290), often append chapters on silence to treatises on the sins of the tongue or on virtuous speech.

Exempla, like pithy *sententiae*, are staples of late medieval moral writing, presenting readers with specific situations, as John of Mirfield's historical anecdote does, in which characters choose to remain silent while others are speaking and expecting them to speak. When *modi* are developed in moral texts by exempla, another ethical element often emerges as central: the figure's virtues and/or vices. As a desirable *habitus* (perhaps best translated as "disposition" or "condition") formed over time by social norms, examples, and repeated actions, a virtue helps to maintain stability or consistency in conduct, a quality that, J. D. Burnley has noted, was valued greatly in late medieval culture.¹⁹ Virtues give people direction and strength as they try to deal with situations that are difficult to manage and, often, even difficult to assess. John Gower's Genius urges Amans to acquire patience so that he will be able to hold his tongue rather than vent his spur-of-the-moment feelings in the sort of angry speech that has been alienating his lady.²⁰ Socrates, Genius tells Amans by way of example, was so given to patience that when his quarrelsome wife insulted him repeatedly and then threatened to dump cold water on his head, "he al softe / Sat stille and noght a word ansuered." After she furiously spilled the water all over him, he, "which wolde noght forsake / His patience," commented mildly that she was simply bestowing wind and rain on him in accordance with the season.²¹ Although exemplary figures, like Gower's Socrates, could choose to act contrary to their virtuous (or vicious) disposition, virtue or vice is a powerful force in moving them toward silence.

By considering only voluntary silences, such as that of Socrates or John of Mirfield's wise man, this book obviously excludes the tongue-tied, those whom *De lingua* describes as deprived of speech by a weighty ligature binding the tongue, and the coerced, like those bound to silence by penance.²² It also omits those figures for whom silence has become obligatory, even if they chose the social role that dictates it, like the religious within their enclosures and confessors (when it comes to what they have heard in confession). Moreover, by examining silences amid the flow of conversation, the book excludes the silences of rapt mystics. Oddly enough, such nonpolitical and nonsocial silences have interested medieval historians of all types more than voluntary ones have. In addition, voluntary silences in one mode of vernacular narratives are also excluded: romances with figures who disguise their identity and cloak their love, even sometimes from the one they love. Almost without exception—even including penitential romances like *Guy of Warwick*—they do not draw on the learned classical and biblical tradition of moral thought about the strategies and ethics of silence in public life. Although I plan to write about the silences of lovers, especially women, I will do it elsewhere.

This book begins with the role of silence in the craft of governing, then moves to the practice of coercive power exercised by religious authorities, in conjunction with the state, against dissidents, who find in silence strategies for resistance and refusal. In these institutional contexts, silence becomes a successful strategy for power, for influence, and for resistance when it springs from settled habits of virtue, like the prudence of a ruler or advisers and the patience of a religious dissident. Their virtues give them deep resources, powers of restraint, consistency (and, therefore, integrity), and time for reflection in fraught and shifting situations. Coercion and asymmetrical power also shape social relations when an individual is seen by a defined group to violate its norms. As in inquisitorial dialogues, silence may be accompanied, even generated, by a fear of missteps that might worsen the deviant's isolated and seemingly helpless position. Finally, this book turns to the social relations between an eager and passionate inquirer and authoritative figures who advocate a philosophical wisdom that values taciturnity in those who are seeking a good life. In the verbal exchanges of education, as in those of a court or social cohort, unequal power relations operate, though the scope of punitive threat may seem more limited. For

this reason, silence remains a powerful strategy for obtaining what is desired even when self-protection is not its end.

In this framework moving from the most public situation to the least, each set of vernacular texts is prefaced by an analysis of prescriptive Latin moral writing that deals with the types of taciturnity and silence explored in the vernacular literature, developing the virtues and emotions central to the strategies of the silent. Chapter 1 presents the major sources of discourse on taciturnity: the conduits from antiquity to the thirteenth century, Albertano da Brescia's *De arte loquendi et tacendi* (On the craft of speaking and keeping silent), and the clergy's moral writing from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Albertano argues that taciturnity is a craft that forestalls violence and promotes prosperity in communal life, all the while advancing the individual citizen. Although his arguments for the benefits of silence rely on a tapestry of Roman, Jewish, and Christian texts, he builds up a barebones practical framework for using initial circumspect silence to assess any speaking situation within civic life. More than *De arte*, clerical texts develop prudence as the virtue that makes taciturnity valuable, indeed, even possible. Not only does it foresee the likely outcomes of speaking or staying silent, but, if it is governed by love, it ensures that those outcomes will benefit others. While clerics share Albertano's sense of the multiple benefits of both initial taciturnity and sustained silence, they distrust even more than he the unrestrained feelings and emotions that drive hasty and excessive speech, the source of violence, self-sabotage, and failed projects.

Prescriptive moral writing on taciturnity and silence in general shapes poems considering ways in which the early Lancastrians can govern effectively in a time of popular unrest, especially ways in which they can gather reliable and comprehensive counsel. In chapter 2, I consider how Thomas Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes* advises Prince Henry (soon to be Henry V) to practice taciturnity as a practical cautionary strategy, derived largely from Albertano's and the clerics' textual amalgam, that will both build up his own reputation and advance the welfare of the realm. Guided by the virtue of prudence, the habit of examining the past in order to make decisions with an eye to their outcomes, taciturnity can avert rash speech in political situations, preventing disaffection, enmity, and strife at court and, more broadly, throughout the realm. Taciturnity becomes exemplary political conduct. Chapter 3 takes up how the evil twin of prudent taciturnity found more than a foothold at the Lancastrian court in the eyes of Hoccleve and, especially, the Wycliffite

author of the satire *Mum and the Sothsegger*. Both poets mock royal advisers, lay as well as clerical, for clinging so desperately to status and reward that they hide popular discontent from the king and refuse to question his destructive designs. I contend that when this self-interested silence is justified in *Mum* by appeals to Roman popular morality, it opens up fissures in the amalgam of classical and of Jewish and Christian materials shaping why moral writers promote taciturnity. In *Mum*, shaped by a long moral tradition of unmasking evil taciturnity and given point by John Wyclif's apocalyptic denunciation of culpably silent ecclesiastics, self-interested silence permeates all institutions, vitiating good governance, working against the welfare of others and the kingdom as a whole.

The four interrogation pageants of the York cycle create a brilliant, lively, and sustained contrast between a patiently silent Jesus and the four violent, manipulative, arrogant, and angry questioners. All of them, I argue in chapter 4, attempt to construe Jesus's baffling and infuriating silences in their own terms as arising from trickery, incapacity, or impotent awe in the face of their greatness. In my reading, they are wholly given over to language as a tool for enforcing hierarchal rule, using threats, boasts, and demotic insults to delegitimize and marginalize the silent Jesus, just as they do the bystanders in their courts. In these ways, I conclude, the York citizens are invited not only to detest the genres of speech the powerful use to intimidate and subject but also to discern the value of patient silence in adversity, especially that caused by corrupt and oppressive political and ecclesiastical authorities. It has the power to resist, to refuse to acknowledge corrupt institutions, to subvert inquisitorial ploys, to shun retaliatory speech, to preserve one's integrity, and to help realize one's purposes. Yet how can mere humans imitate the patient silence of Jesus, divine as well as human? After glancing at the surprising silences of Margery Kempe, chapter 4 ends by examining how the Wycliffite William Thorpe chooses when to use silence to resist his interrogators and when to contest their charges in order to avoid the evil taciturnity condemned by Wyclif.

Although chapter 5 shifts to social situations from institutional ones, it retains a focus on silence as a strategy for dealing with oppressive power. Thomas in Hoccleve's "My Complaint" has been cast out of his close urban social cohort of government clerks and is dogged by the hostile scrutiny of former companions who suspect that his former mental illness has returned and will disrupt their tightly policed norms of sociability. He is paralyzed by

fear, an emotion that in moral writing may either obviate a good outcome by its overwhelming images of a terrible future or assist agents in acting for their own benefit. Hoccleve uses this situation to probe more fully and deeply than any other late medieval English writer why initially appealing silences fail to benefit oppressed figures. Out of fear lest he worsen his isolation, Thomas retreats from conversation altogether, aiming to escape his former cohort's misjudgments and slights. Yet he comes to realize that silence has debilitating limits. As an ambiguous sign, it may be misconstrued as a sign of illness, while, as moral texts warn, it only aggravates his sorrows. Finally, Thomas, I argue, finds a way out of the prison house of silence by grasping that his writing can become a confession of faith in a redemptive God, whose mutable natural world has brought him healing as well as suffering, as it has done and will do to others.

In contrast with Hoccleve's Thomas moving away from silences of limited efficacy and oppressive weight, Will in the third dream in *Piers Plowman* moves from impulsive speech to embrace taciturnity within the social process of learning from authoritative figures. Moral discourse on taciturnity, I argue in chapter 6, informs the final episodes of this dream, leading Will the Dreamer to grasp how essential taciturnity is for learning wisdom and acquiring knowledge. Moral sayings from Greek philosophers prescribing for their pupils and from Jewish wisdom literature help Will to understand how his own reckless and adversarial speech, directed toward an authoritative figure who could enlighten him, has blocked the way to learning what constitutes a life worth living and has inflicted injuries and losses on him. More importantly, Will learns from his experience and his wise instructor Imaginitif to embrace verbal restraint and attentive listening, rather than angry disputation, as a means to learn from others what he passionately desires to know.

Quite by chance, I began writing about culpable and destructive self-interested silences in political life during the first impeachment trial of President Donald Trump, in which some holders of public office and presidential advisers refused even to appear as witnesses and some of those who did invoked the self-protective right to remain silent. Chapter 4, on patient silence while suffering seemingly overwhelming adversity, occupied the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which so many people were cut off from others even as they were gutted by a little understood and possibly fatal virus. I began writing about silence generated by fears

of a threatening future during the strangely and violently contested aftermath of the US presidential campaign of 2020. Also by chance, thirty-five years ago, I began a book-length study of deviant speech in late medieval English literature (*Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature*) while public figures were being interrogated by Congress over lying during the Iran-Contra affair. Fifteen years later, I wrote much of *Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing*, a study of what constituted effective social critique in late medieval England, during protests over the Second Iraq War. We are sometimes told (Are we not?) that medieval studies has little to do with our pressing problems and public debates. As a literary historian, I offer unapologetically this third monograph (a trilogy!) on the ethics of communication in medieval moral, narrative, and dramatic literature. Public silences then, as now, have strategies and consequences, dimensions that medieval imaginative writers explore subtly yet analytically in order to provoke ethical reflection and pragmatic action.