357 To Be Silent (*Tacere*)

Eccle. 3[:1, 7] it is said, “All things have their season … A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.” For when it is incumbent upon a man from duty, unless danger be imminent from being silent, one is expected more to be silent than to speak. Therefore, it is said in Prov. 11[:12]: “But the wise man will hold his peace.” As it is read in Valerius,[[1]](#endnote-1) concerning Xenocrates when he heard slanders and did not respond. Why have you been silent? He responded, I sometimes have regretted speaking, but being silent never. Wherefore Amos the prophet, speaking concerning persecution, he commanded those yet to come, he said in chapter 5[:13]: “Therefore the prudent shall keep silence at that time, for it is an evil time.”

Again, Christ before Pilate was silent, Matt. 26[:63]. For where it is incumbent upon a man from duty to speak nothing of the truth, he can be endangered from silence, to be silent is wrong. Wherefore Isaias sent by the Lord to speak forth among sinners where truth was endangered, he said in chapter 6[:5]: “Woe is me, because I have held my peace; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people that has unclean lips.” Macrobius narrates in his first book, *De saturnalibus*,[[2]](#endnote-2) that when it was the custom among the Roman senators to take their sons with them to the senate, and thus by the extraction of wisdom they might learn more. It happened that the wife of a certain senator urged her son Papirius to reveal within the council what was treated for so long.

¶ But that one fabricating a witty lie lest he thus reveal the secrets heard, said it was discussed whether it was more expedient for the republic that one man married two wives, or whether one woman should wed two husbands. On the next day that woman congregated with many other matrons, came into the council and said expressly that it would be better that one woman should wed two husbands. When all were in amazement, Papirius the boy confessed that he had made it up to evade the beatings of his mother, and thus not reveal the secrets of the senate. And from this it was made a law that no one would enter into the council except that Papirius to whom the reward for this case should be imposed the name Pretextatus. Wherefore Ovid,[[3]](#endnote-3) in a little book which is referenced without its title, and what is less labor, too, than keeping silence?

¶ Jerome narrates to Nepocianus, *Epistola* 35,[[4]](#endnote-4) that Pythagoras the philosopher entreated his disciples that for a certain space of time they remain silent.

1. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 7.6.ext. 6 (LCL 493:118-119): Quid? Xenocratis responsum quam laudabile! cum maledico quorundam sermoni summo silentio interesset, uno ex iis quaerente cur solus linguam suam cohiberet, ‘quia dixisse me’ inquit ‘aliquando paenituit, tacuisse numquam.’

And again, how laudable was that answer of Xenocrates! Being present at a backbiting conversation between certain persons, he said absolutely nothing. When one of them asked why he alone held his tongue, he said: “Because I have sometimes been sorry I spoke, never that I kept silent.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.19-26 (LCL 510:60-65): mos antea senatoribus fuit in curiam cum praetextatis filiis introire. cum in senatu res maior quaepiam consultabatur eaque in diem posterum prolata est,34 placuit35 ut hanc rem super qua tractavissent ne quis enuntiaret priusquam decreta esset.

20. mater Papirii pueri, qui cum parente suo in curia fuerat, percontatur filium quidnam in senatu egissent patres. puer respondit tacendum esse neque id dici licere. mulier fit audiendi cupidior: secretum rei et silentium pueri animum eius ad inquirendum everberat: quaerit igitur compressius violentiusque.

21. tum puer, urgente matre, lepidi atque festivi mendacii consilium capit. actum in senatu dixit utrum videretur utilius magisque e re publica esse unusne ut duas uxores haberet an ut una apud duos nupta esset.

22. hoc illa ubi audivit, animo compavescit, domo trepidans egreditur, ad ceteras matronas adfert, postridieque ad senatum copiosae matrum familias catervae confluunt, lacrimantes atque obsecrantes orant una potius ut duobus nupta fieret quam ut uni duae.

23. senatores ingredientes curiam quae illa mulierum intemperies et quid sibi postulatio istaec vellet mirabantur et ut non parvae rei prodigium illam verecundi sexus impudicam insaniam pavescebant.

24. puer Papirius publicum metum demit. nam in medium curiae progressus quid ipsi mater audire institisset, quid matri ipse simulasset sicuti fuerat enarrat.

25. senatus fidem atque ingenium pueri exosculatur consultumque facit uti posthac pueri cum patribus in curiam ne introeant praeter illum unum Papirium, eique puero postea cognomentum honoris gratia decreto inditum Praetextatus ob tacendi loquendique in praetexta aetate prudentiam.

It was once the custom for senators to enter the senate-chamber with their sons dressed in their praetextae. When some business of greater than usual importance was being discussed and it had to be put over until the following day, the senate resolved no one was to report the matter under discussion before a decree had been passed.

20. The mother of young Papirius, who had been in the chamber with his father, asked her son what business the senate fathers had transacted. The boy replied that he had to keep silent and wasn’t allowed to speak of it. The woman became yet more eager to hear: the matter’s concealment and the boy’s silence goaded her to press her inquiry, and so she asked with greater urgency and force.

21. Pressed by his mother, the boy conceived a witty and playful lie: he said the senate was considering whether it would be judged more expedient and in the public interest for one man to have two wives or for one woman to be married to two men.

22. Hearing this, his mother became panic-stricken, left the house all atremble, and brought the report to all the other married women: next day saw large contingents of matrons streaming to the senate. In tearful supplication they begged that one woman be married to two men rather than vice versa.

23. Entering the chamber, the senators wondered what the women’s furor and odd demand could mean, and they feared that such shameless frenzy on the part of the modest sex portended no small crisis.

24. Young Papirius calmed the general distress: advancing to the center of the chamber, he told how his mother had pressed him, and how he had made up the story to tell her, just as it had happened.

25. The senate hugely admired the boy’s trustworthiness and wit and resolved that—except for Papirius—boys should henceforth not come into the chamber with their fathers. For Papirius it was decreed that he would henceforth be given the honorific surname Praetextatus, because of the wisdom he showed in both silence and speech while still of an age to wear the praetexta. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ovid, *Amores* 2.2.28 (LCL 41:384-385): quis minor est autem quam tacuisse labor?

and what is less labour, too, than keeping silence? [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jerome, *Epistola* 52.15 (PL 22:539): Hippocrates adjurat discipulos suos, antequam doceat, et in verba sua jurare compellit: extorquet sacramento silentium, sermonem, incessum, habitum, moresque praescribit. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)