97 A Slanderer or To Slander (*Detractor uel Detrahere*)

The wise man, wishing us to be informed against slander, says, Wis. 1[:11]: “Refrain your tongue from detraction.” For the slanderer in slandering is intoxicated by the sounding of his own tongue. However, because the serpent[[1]](#endnote-1) does not make anything, but it is full of poison, therefore he leaves poison in the place which he bites.

¶ The naturalists say[[2]](#endnote-2) that a dragon has a very venomous tongue, to such an extent that it infects the air and that is the fire which seems to breathe from its mouth, so the slanderer. Wherefore, one slanderer is he who speaks one word, it is produced and yet one word in one moment infects many ears and souls, Eccli. 21[:3]: “The teeth thereof are the teeth of a lion, killing the souls of men.” The mouth of the lion[[3]](#endnote-3) because it eats raw flesh is fetid, so also the mouth of the slanderer.

¶ Again, the lion[[4]](#endnote-4) fleeing the hunter takes the flesh appearing in its teeth and nails, thus the slanderer takes the words which he wants to flee the devil. Wherefore, Bernard,[[5]](#endnote-5) everyone who slanders shows himself first empty of charity, then he intends so the one whom he slanders would come into hate. Therefore, he extinguishes charity in so far as it is in him.

¶ Again, this vice directly attacks charity, Eccle. 10[:11]: “If a serpent bites in silence, he is nothing better that backbites secretly.” Gen. 3[:15], it is said to the serpent, “You shall lie in wait for her heel.” Thus, the slanderer by her heel whom he slanders. In these things, see Matt. 12[:34]: “O generation of vipers, how can you speak good things, whereas you are evil?” Jerome, *Ad Ruffinum,* epistle 72,[[6]](#endnote-6) what good does it do me if you tell my faults to others?

¶ Again, Bernard,[[7]](#endnote-7) who of these is worse, the one who slanders or the one willingly listening to the one slandering, I cannot easily say. Wherefore, Gen. 9[:4]: “Flesh with blood you shall not eat.” And that same, Lev. 7[:14-15] and Act. 15[:20]. Therefore, the Philosopher says[[8]](#endnote-8) every animal eating raw flesh has a fetid mouth. And such beasts are crueler than others. For they do not touch those who are of their kind. Therefore, the Apostle says, Gal. 5[:15]: “But if you bite and devour one another; take heed you be not consumed one of another.”

¶ Again, James 4[:11]: “Detract not one another, my brethren.” Jerome, as above,[[9]](#endnote-9) if you wish to correct, then correct me. What good does it do me if you tell my faults to others, if I do not know the other whom you wound with your slanders?

¶ Thus to each one you speak if to no other you say, Plainly, this is not for me to amend. But if you wish to satisfy your vice, slander your sins in yourself and don’t twist back on others. Never slander another if you understand yourself well. Cicero, book three, *De Officiis*,[[10]](#endnote-10) says for a man to take anything wrongfully from another, and to increase his own means of comfort by his fellow-man’s discomfort is more contrary to nature than death, or any other human passion. Wherefore, here Cicero imagines concerning the detractor as if of a mad mender who takes pieces from cloth of differing people from which however, they do not fit to the garment and however they deteriorate the other’s garment. Thus, the slanderer by this conversation endeavors to detract one virtue and from another so that he himself may appear the fairer, but by this way he will not be embellished.

¶ Again, the slanderer is worse than a thief, because the thief takes only money, the slanderer takes fame. A vindication of slander is evident in Num. 12[:10], where Mary, the sister of Moses, slandering him was struck with leprosy, and it is fitting for who by slandering mutilates the society of men. Justly she herself was sequestered from the society of men.

¶ Again, Num. 13[:26], because the explorers slandered the land of promise they did not enter it. Wherefore, Prov. 13[:13]: “Whosoever speaks ill of anything, binds himself for the time to come,” namely, as a penalty because he is held to restitution of fame which he has taken away than diminished. Therefore, slander is particularly to be watched. Therefore, superiors, because it is difficult to restore fame of those if it is damaged, Exod. 22[:28]: “You shall not speak ill of the gods, and the prince of your people you shall not curse.”

¶ The punishment of this sin is figured in Gen. 9[:22-23], in the son of Noah who derided his father to be respected and showed his derision to others. Wherefore, he incurred the curse of his father and he was delivered over to servitude.

¶ Again, slander is experienced at injuring because it kills three souls, the one listening, the one scandalized, and the slanderer himself. Wherefore, Bernard, *Super Canticum*,[[11]](#endnote-11)which of these is worse, to slander or (the one listening), as above.[[12]](#endnote-12) For according of Augustine,[[13]](#endnote-13) no one would be a slanderer if he were not a listener. Wherefore, Lev. 19[:14]: “You shall not speak evil of the deaf,” that is, do not slander one absent who cannot hear. Prov. [24:21]: “Have nothing to do with detractors.” “Because their perdition shall suddenly come,” [Jer. 6:26]. For according to Augustine,[[14]](#endnote-14) slanderers diminish the good of men and exaggerate the evils, they stab without distinction.

¶ Therefore, let one be whole to follow the example of the ant, Prov. 6[:6]: “Go to the ant … and learn wisdom.” Whose nature[[15]](#endnote-15) is that if it finds a corpse [of a fellow ant] that is corrupted in one part, [etc.]. And we ought to spread the good fame of our neighbor, not scatter the evils, Eccli. 19[:24]: the just man “casts down his countenance and makes as if he did not see.” But the slanderer inclines himself to the evil part. He is similar in this to the bat[[16]](#endnote-16) which settles upon a lit lamp so that he may extinguish it because he hates the light and nevertheless, he burns himself, Isai. 5[:20]: “Woe to you that call evil good,” perverse are their intents. Prov. 25[:23]: “The north wind drives away rain, as does a sad countenance a backbiting tongue.”

¶ Again, the slanderer is compared to a bear, Dan. 7[:5], which has “three rows in the mouth thereof, and in the teeth thereof, and thus they said to it: Arise, devour much flesh.” Three rows of teeth are the kinds of slander which are contradiction, derogation, and slander. Contradiction is to contend against the acknowledged truth. Wherefore, someone is appreciated less.

¶ Derogation is the decrease of the goods of another, and such is similar to a dog or animal having unequal lips, greater and lesser is the slander when it is spoken concerning the evil he broadens his lips, Prov. 20[:19]: “Meddle not with him that reveals secrets … and opens wide his lips,” but in the goods of one’s neighbor he uses short lips.

¶ The third kind is said to be slander which turns doubts into partly evil, Eccli. 11[:33]: “For he lies in wait and turns good into evil, and on the elect, he will lay a blot.” Therefore, do according to the counsel, Prov. 4[:24]: “Remove from you a froward mouth, and let detracting lips be far from you.” However, according to Bernard,[[17]](#endnote-17) there are two species of this vice, of which one is naked, which is immediately evident, the other is shaded, which begins by some commendation. If the slanderer thus begins, God knows that I love him about whom I speak, and I do not speak on account of his evil, but I wish that he would conduct himself otherwise, wherefore, he would be more commended.

¶ Again, according to Augustine, in the book *De Similitudinibus,[[18]](#endnote-18)* detraction happens as often as something is said about someone with that intention that he will be less valued, and it is committed in five ways according to some. First when the good which is known to be a fact is denied. Second when the good which cannot be denied is perverted. Third when the hidden evil is revealed. Fourth when the factual evil is augmented to the confusion of the doer. Fifth when a new evil is manufactured.

¶ Concerning all of which the Apostle says, [Rom. 1:30]: “Detractors, hateful to God.” Again, Ambrose, book three, *De officiis,[[19]](#endnote-19)* Christ emptied himself so that he might enrich man with virtues. However, you by slandering as much as in you lies, you spoil what Christ has clothed. Wherefore, Augustine, *Super Joannem,* homily 5,[[20]](#endnote-20) it is more burdensome to pursue in man because he is a Christian than because he is a man. Again, Anselm, in the book *De similitudinibus*,[[21]](#endnote-21) says there are three kinds of homicide which are murder of the body, slander, brotherly hatred. Concerning which it is said *De penitentia,* Dist. 1, c. *Homicidiorum*.[[22]](#endnote-22)

¶ Again, Chrysostom, *Super Mattheum,* homily 48,[[23]](#endnote-23) slandering he confounds himself as if one might say the sun is dark. Not only does he slander, but he confounds himself.

¶ Again, Gregory, *Moralia* 22,[[24]](#endnote-24) very often, we can be torn in pieces by calumnies even, that so when the voice of one commending lifts the heart, the tongue of one calumniating should abase it. And he puts the example of the tree, which is so driven by the impulse of one wind as to seem now that it might well-nigh be rooted out of its place, is set up again by a blast of another wind from an opposite quarter is brought back from another to its standing position. And through this it grows better. 2 Cor. 6[:8]: “By honor and dishonor.” Therefore, says Jerome, *Epistola* 94,[[25]](#endnote-25) they cannot overturn the life of the saints, although they strive to discolor fame, but the slander of the depraved too little hurt the just. For the false rumor is quickly oppressed, and the later life judges concerning the previous. However, one ought not to neglect oneself, because others discern concerning themselves. Because according to Ambrose, first book, *De officiis,[[26]](#endnote-26)* to neglect the works, judgments, or conscience of the good is either arrogance or dissolution. For, our reputation is necessary for us one account of ourselves but also on account of others, Causa 11, quest. 3, [c. 13].[[27]](#endnote-27)

¶ Again, the slanderer is like the dog which first puts its mouth to the tails of other dogs in order to smell their foulness. The Philosopher, book 3.[[28]](#endnote-28) Look at dogs, look at workers of evil, rather they are similar to the serpent whose tongue is bifurcated, according to the Philosopher, second book, *De animalibus*,[[29]](#endnote-29) because certainly strong in the natural world it is for man if he is bilingual, since in his other senses he has two organs, but in the sense of speaking he has only the one instrument of the tongue. Therefore, according to Bernard, *Super Cantica*, homily 14,[[30]](#endnote-30) take care not to be either a curious explorer or an imprudent judge of another’s life. Even if I have committed the act thus which you seize upon, however it is better to excuse the intention if you cannot excuse the work.

1. Isidore, *Etymologies* 12.4.3 (PL 82:442): quorum tot venena, quot genera; tot pernicies, quot species; tot dolores, quot colores habentur.

12.4.39-42 (PL 82:447):  Omnes autem serpentes natura sua frigidae sunt, nec percutiunt, nisi quando calescunt; nam quando sunt frigidae, nullum tangunt. 40. Unde et venena eorum plus die quam nocte nocent. Torpent enim noctis algore, et merito, quia frigidi sunt nocturno rore. In se enim adducunt vaporem gelidae pestes et natura frigidae. Unde et hieme in nodos torpent, aestate solvuntur.41. Inde est quod dum quicunque serpentium veneno percutitur, primum obstupescit; et postea ubi in illo calefactum ipsum virus exarserit, statim et hominem exstinguit. Venenum autem dictum, eo quod per venas vadit. Infusa enim pestis ejus per **[Col.0447C]**venas vegetatione corporis aucta discurrit, et animam exigit. 42. Unde non potest venenum nocere, nisi hominis tetigerit sanguinem.

Snakes have as many poisons (*venena*) as there are kinds (*genera*); cause as many deaths (*pernices*) as there are species (*species*); resulting in as many griefs (*dolores*) as they have colors (*colores*). (Book 12, 4:39-42): Snakes are cold by nature and do not strike until they warm up; they are therefore more dangerous by day than by night. A person who is struck by a snake's poison first becomes numb (as from cold), but when the poison becomes hot it burns and immediately kills the man. Its poison (*venenum*) is so called because it runs through the veins; therefore the poison can do no harm unless it touches the blood of a man.  [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Hugo de Folieto [c. 1110-72 CE] (from British Library MS. Sloane 278, Druce translation): This creature is lifted by the strength of its venom into the air as if it were flying, and the air is set in motion by it.

Cf. Levithan is described as a fire breather, Job 41:9-10: Sternutatio ejus splendor ignis, et oculi ejus ut palpebrae diluculi. De ore ejus lampades procedunt, sicut taedae ignis accensae.

His sneezing is like the shining of fire, and his eyes like the eyelids of the morning. Out of his mouth go forth lamps, like torches of lighted fire. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Pliny, *Natural History* 11.115.277 (LCL 353:606-607): Animae leonis virus grave

The lion’s breathg contains a severe poison. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *The Bestiary: A Book of Beasts*, trans. T. H. White (NY: Capricon Books, 1954): In the second place, they pop their paws carefully into their mouths and pull out the meat of their own accord, when they have eaten too much. Indeed, when they have to run away from somebody, they perform the same action if they are full up. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Bernard, *Sermones in Cantica canticorum* 25.4 (PL 183:895-96): Omnis qui detrahit, primum quidem se ipsum prodit vacuum charitate, Deinde quid aliud detrahendo intendit, nisi ut is, cui detrahit, veniat in odium vel contemptum ipsis, apud quos detrahit? Ferit ergo charitatem in omnibus qui se audiunt lingua maledica, et quantum in se est, necat funditus et exstinguit: [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jerome, *Epistola* 125 *Ad Rusticum monacum* 19 (PL 22:1084): Quid enim mihi prodest, si aliis mala referas mea? [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Bernard, *De consideratione...ad Eugenium Tertium* 2.13.22 (PL 182:756): Porro detrahere, aut detrahentem audire, quid horum damnabilius sit, non facile dixerim. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Aristotle, *History of Animals* 4.8, 535a6-12 (Barnes 1:846): Testaceans have the senses of smell and taste. With regard to their possession of the sense of smell, that is proved by the use of baits, e.g. in the case of the purple-fish; for this creature is enticed by baits of rancid meat, which it perceives and is attracted to from a great distance. The proof that it possesses a sense of taste hangs by the proof of its sense of smell; for whenever an animal is attracted to a thing by perceiving its smell, it is sure to like the taste of it. Further, all animals furnished with a mouth derive pleasure or pain from the touch of sapid juices. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jerome, 125 *Ad Rusticum monacum* 19 (PL 22:1084): si me vis corrigere delinquentem, aperte increpa, tantum ne occulte mordeas. ... Quid enim mihi prodest, si aliis mala referas mea? Si me nesciente, peccatis meis, imo detractionibus tuis alium vulneres. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cicero, *De officiis* 3.21 (LCL 30:288): Detrahere igitur alteri aliquid et hominem hominis incommodo suum commodum augere magis est contra naturam quam mors, quam paupertas, quam dolor, quam cetera, quae possunt aut corpori accidere aut rebus externis. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bernard, *De consideratione...ad Eugenium Tertium* 2.13.22 (PL 182:756): Porro detrahere, aut detrahentem audire, quid horum damnabilius sit, non facile dixerim. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Fasciculum Morum*, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), (160-161): Unde dicit Bernardus: “Qui, inquit, detrahit aut detrahentem libenter audit, quis horum dampnabilior fuerit, non facile dixerim.”

Therefore says Bernard: The person who backbites and the person who willingly listen to him—which of them is more blameworthy is hard to say. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Augustine, cf. *Fasciculus Morum*. ed. Siegfried Wenzel (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), (160-161): Nam secundum Augustinum numquam esset detractor si non esset auditor.

For according to Augustine there would never be a backbiters if there were not an audience.”

Cf. V. E. Langum, “Sins of Tongues, Pains of Members: Speech, Division and Sacrament in Late Medieval Exempla” *Marginalia,* vol. 6 (2006-2007 Cambridge Yearbook), n. 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Augustine, [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis* 11.36.110 (LCL 353:500-501): sepeliunt inter se viventium solae praeter hominem.

They are the only living creatures beside man that bury their dead.

Higden must have left out part of this analogy. Perhaps the following blog may shed some light on what he has presented: “On the death rituals of ants”: To the naked eye, ants deal with their dead much like humans. When a member of the colony dies, the carcass will lie where it fell for a period of roughly two days. In the fashion of a wake, this time period presumably gives the other ants time to pay their respects to their fallen comrade. After two days, the living ants take the dead ant to an ant graveyard in a respectful procession, honoring the good work it performed for the colony. Two days after death, the tiny ant corpse begins emitting a chemical called oleic acid. To an ant, the smell of oleic acid equals death. The experience of death is not a sense of loss, not a dead body, not an ascent to ant afterlife- it is simply oleic acid. As soon as the living ants smell the oleic acid smell, they spring into action, carrying the tiny decaying intruder out of their midst and dumping it into the pile. Well, not quite. The carcass does lie there for two days and it is carted off to a pile of dead ants. But this isn’t done out of social obligations or as a healing ritual to soften the loss. As Harvard entomologist Edward O. Wilson discovered, in reality, the dead ant must lay there for two days because the other ants simply don’t realize it is dead.

<http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/on-the-death-rituals-of-ants> [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Fasciculus morum*, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989): Et sunt similes verpertilioni, cuius natura est quod quando videt lampadem aut cereum accensum, seqmper querit lumen extinguere.

Such people are like a bat: when it sees a lighted lamp or candle, it naturally triest to extinguish the light. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Bernard, *Sermones in Cantica canticorum* 63.intro., 4 (PL 183:1080-81): et de duobus vulpium generibus, scilicet adulatoribus et detractoribus; et de tentationibus monachorum novitiorum. … Pessima vulpes occultus detractor, sed non minus nequam adulator blandus. Cavebit sapiens ab his. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Augustine, cf. Eadmer of Canterbury, *Liber de Sancti Anselmi Similitudinibus* 150 (PL 159:686): Detractio itaque est quotiescunque quis aliquid ea intentione de aliquo dicit unde ipse vel minus amari sive minus appretiari possit. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* 3.3.15 (PL 16:149): Christus enim Dominus cum esset in Dei forma, exinanivit se, ut formam susciperet hominis, quam operum suorum locupletaret virtutibus. Tu ergo spolias, quem Christus induit? Tu exuis, quem vestivit Christus? [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium tractatus* 5.12 (PL 35:1420): Quod homo est, commune cum multis: quod christianus est, secernitur a multis; et plus ad illum pertinet quod christianus, quam quod homo. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Anselm in Eadmer of Canterbury, *Liber de Sancti Anselmi Similitudinibus* 148 (PL 159:685): Tria sunt genera homicidii, quae pari poena plectuntur: interfectio fratrum, detractio, odium. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Decretum, *De poenitentia,* D. 1, c. 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. John Chrysostom, [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Gregory, *Moralia* 22.7.17 (PL 76:223): plerumque miro rectoris nostri moderamine etiam detractionibus lacerari permittimur, ut cum nos vox laudantis elevat, lingua detrahentis humiliet, quia et arbor saepe quae unius venti impulsu ita impellitur, ut pene jam erui posse videatur, alterius e diverso venientis flatu erigitur, et quae hac ex parte inflexionem pertulit, ab alia ad statum redit. Unde et illa arbor alte radicata quasi inter adversantes ventos fixa steterat, [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Jerome, *Epistola* 54, *Ad Furiam* 54.13 (PL 22:556): Falsus rumor cito opprimitur, et vita posterior judicat de priore. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum* 1.47.226 (PL 16:90-91): Nam negligere bonorum judicia vel arrogantiae, vel dissolutionis est: quorum alterum superbiae ascribitur, alterum negligentiae. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Decretum, C. 11, q. 3, c. 13, *Si quis non obediat.* [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. cf. Aristotle, *History of Animals,* 8.5, 594b25 (Barnes 1:930): The wind discharged from off its stomach is pungent, and its urine emits a strong odour, a phenomenon which, in the case of dogs, accounts for their habit of sniffing at trees; for, by the way, the lion, like the dog, lifts its leg to void its urine. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Aristotle, *History of Animals,* 2.17, 508a23 (Barnes 1:807): The tongue, moreover, is thin and long and black, and can be protruded to a great distance. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Bernard, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum* 40.5 (PL 183:984): tantum cave alienae conversationis esse aut curiosus explorator, aut temerarius judex. Etiamsi perperam actum quid deprehendas, nec sic judices proximum, magis autem excusa. Excusa intentionem, si opus non potes; [↑](#endnote-ref-30)