

Rylee Davis

English 221

Prof. Adam Zucker

10 Nov 2023

The Word “Tongue”

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are 13 meanings of the word tongue. One’s mind might first think of the anatomical organ, as it is the primary literal meaning. In modern times, it can also be a way of speaking, a piece of fabric under shoe laces, language, a jet of flame, etc. During Shakespeare’s time, the word tongue was entirely known as the organ in your mouth or a manner of speaking. Due to the wide range of meanings, the definition of tongue can largely diverge from its most well-known meaning; a muscular organ that aids in chewing, literally, speaking and breathing is very different from fire. However, metaphorically, you could have a ‘fiery tongue.’

As found in the Lexicon of Early Modern English, there are often adjectives—or participles—accompanying the word tongue. Whether it is “golden,” “lying” or “mortal,” the tongue is often characterized by its surrounding words, found in *The Art of English Poesy* by George Puttenham (1589). The word tongue is regularly personified and conveyed as its own being. Whether one’s tongue is separate from their character or wholeheartedly encapsulating it, throughout history it has represented a major, distinctive part of their person. The emphasis of one’s tongue points to the importance of voice and agency. Without an ability to speak, expressing thoughts and feelings would be difficult. A common saying is “watch your tongue,” often used when one is speaking freely or rather rash. Therefore, the tongue is a gateway to autonomy over thoughts and emotions. Shakespeare aligns with one usage of the word tongue by

characterizing one's person alongside it: "When shrill-tongued Fulvia scolds. The messengers!" (1.1.34-35). By adjoining "shrill" and "tongued," Fulvia is conveyed as loud and high pitched, like a cry. Or it can depict the public in a certain light, "Speak to me home; mince not the general tongue" (1.2.115). Here, "the general tongue" represents the common people's perception of Antony, not necessarily the correct one. The critical diction creates a sense of dismissal and supremacy rather than the public. The power of contextualized words is revealed, as the elucidation of the word tongue can entirely change its significance and interpretation.

Additionally, in Antony and Cleopatra, the word tongue is used to embody comprehensible expression. Spoken words are often concrete and may not correctly encapsulate one's true feelings: "Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can / Her heart inform her tongue—the swan's-down feather / That stands upon the swell at the full of tide / And neither way inclines." (3.2.56-60). Initially, the excerpt conveys Octavia's indecision between loyalty to her husband or brother. However, after reevaluating the broad definition of tongue, the description illustrates the internal strife and uncertainty between two different entities: the tongue and the heart. Such a conflict displays the eternal battle of one's mind and heart, and one's tongue is the result of the battle.

When one is "tongue-tied", they are unable to speak openly and fully express their feelings. A tongue—one's words—represents eternal agency; it is one of the sole controllable aspects of life. Oftentimes, expressing a feeling with words is entirely impossible to fully articulate; as seen in Soothsayer, "I see it in / My motion, have it not in my tongue: but yet / Hie you to Egypt again" (2.3.17-18). Within Shakespeare's works, there is intention and manipulation of his words. In a complex situation, words may not be enough. Shakespeare's use of metatheatricality emphasized the need for alternative forms of expression. The form in which

words are conveyed largely dictates its significance and interpretation; without the ability to articulate one's thoughts and emotions through words, one may be unable to integrate nuance throughout. Enobarbus displays forms in which Lepidus could express his admiration for Antony and Caesar effectively, alluding to the utilization of alternative measures:

“But he loves Caesar best; yet he loves Antony. Hoo! Hearts, tongues, figures, scribes, bards, poets, cannot Think, speak, cast, write, sing, number—hoo!—His love to Antony. But as for Caesar, Kneel down, kneel down, and wonder” (3.2.17-22).

Shakespeare creates a sense of metatheatricity through congeries of words. Especially by contrasting Antony's reputation for frivolousness after time in Egypt with Caesar's ideal Roman, warrior-like simplicity. Enobarbus emphasizes the power of expression, especially through one's tongue, regardless if a bard, poet or simpleton verbalizes it.

Shakespeare's usage of the word tongue certainly doesn't include the modern 'tongue' of a sneaker. However, he does largely include the meaning of time regarding one's manner of speaking. Shakespeare elaborates upon the generalized definition through alternative manners of expression. Through calculated diction and broad methods of conveyance, the abilities of words are ceaseless. With this in mind, Shakespeare's play is much more impactful. Shakespeare's own tongue and intention is woven within the essence of all of his written words, including Antony and Cleopatra. It is entirely different to read with a greater awareness of Shakespeare's deliberateness. Especially after considering the power of expression through metadrama, it becomes rather ironic. Shakespeare confirmed the power of one's tongue; whether written or spoken, there is an aim and personalized nuance within everyone's *tongue*.