

‘MY LADY TONGUE’: THOMAS TOMKIS’S *LINGUA*

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This paper was presented at the 2002 *METH* meeting at Nottingham which took as its theme ‘Language and Languages’. The play it considers falls distinctly outside *METH*’s normal chronological range: Thomas Tomkis’s *Lingua* was first published in 1607, probably shortly after its first performance at the university of Cambridge.¹ Although relatively late, it is an enlightening text to look at in the context of the 2002 theme because this is a play which personifies language itself, as a character on stage. Since it drew on traditional as well as more recent theories of language and modes of performance, it provides a certain meta-theatrical commentary on some of the issues raised by other papers presented to the meeting. *Lingua* is a play which can give us some theatrical insight into how language could literally be *perceived* on stage at the end of sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

The play’s full title in the first edition is: *Lingua: or The Combat of the Tongue, And the five Senses For Superiority. A pleasant Comoedie*. Although there is no attribution in the published text it is believed to have been written by Thomas Tomkis for student performance at Trinity College, Cambridge. The notebook of John Harington records in 1610:

A Note of things sent to London the 29th of January 1609

...

a bundle of Comedies, rul’d: The combat of *Lingua* made by Thomas Tomkis of Trinity colledge in Cambridge²

Tomkis is known as a member of Trinity, taking his BA in 1600/1601, and as the author of another university comedy in English, *Albumazar*.³ *Lingua* combines, among other forms, two familiar theatrical genres: Plautine or Terentian comedy featuring intrigue, comic servants, and witty repartee; and allegorical educational morality in the tradition of the *Wit and Science* plays.⁴ Its combination of showy academic wit with a degree of slapstick and student humour seems to confirm its university origins. The play was popular for the next fifty years, at least as a reading text, with five subsequent editions appearing before 1657.⁵

Apart from Lingua herself the play's cast personifies, among others, the Five Senses, Common Sense, Memory, and Imagination, living in the land of Microcosm governed by the queen Psyche. The central action focuses on Lingua's claim to recognition as a sixth sense of equal status to the others. In pursuing her ends she tricks the Five Senses into falling out with each other and is brought to a hearing before the court of Common Sense where her claims are largely rejected. In revenge she poisons the Senses but is finally brought to book and imprisoned. Lingua is an ambivalent figure: she offers articulate and intellectually persuasive arguments in her own defence, yet is presented as treacherous and antagonistic to the other characters, and is largely undercut and repressed by the play. She is not the only focus of the drama: the Five Senses are engagingly allegorically explored both in the action and in the vividly detailed and elaborate emblematic shows each brings to the formal hearing. But for the purposes of this paper I want primarily to explore the figure of Lingua herself and what she can tell us about perceptions of language on the stage.

What, first, does Lingua represent? It is not *language* as such but, as her name suggests, the *tongue* or spoken language. Visually the character is emblematised as the tongue: she is 'apparelled in a Crimson Satten gowne, a Dressing of white Roses, a little Skeane tyed in a purple Skarfe, a paire of red Buskins drawne with white Ribband, silk garters, gloves etc' (A3^v). When imprisoned at the end of the play she is put 'vnder the custody of two strong doores ... well garded with 30. tall watchmen' (M4^v). So Lingua is Speech; and not just speech but, significantly perhaps for a university play, vernacular speech. This play is one of the first Cambridge student comedies written and performed in English. Only about ten years earlier, in 1592, the Vice Chancellor and Heads of Colleges had complained to the Lord Chancellor about being asked to perform an English comedy for Queen Elizabeth: 'how fitt wee shalbe for this that is moved, having no practize in this Englishe vaine, and beinge (as wee thincke) nothinge beseeminge our Studentes ... wee much doubt'.⁶ Lingua herself lays claim to the academic and intellectual arts of rhetoric, and to 'ancient *Hebrew* ... learned *Greeke* ... the *Romaine* Eloquent' (A3^v) as well as modern languages. But within the university context her definition as primarily vernacular speech — while fascinating for the purposes of exploring theatrical language — immediately devalues her status.

The most obvious and vivid way this is realised in performance is in her characterisation as a stereotypical unruly woman. From the opening

moments and throughout the play *Lingua* is accused of the popular female vices: she speaks far too much, is presumptuous, ‘an idle prating Dame ... decking your babling selfe / With vsurpt titles’ (A3^{r-v}); she is sharp-tongued, bitter, rebellious, and idle. Her verbal alacrity is presented in accordance with the model Benedick lays on Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*: ‘Here’s a dish I love not; I cannot endure my Lady Tongue’.⁷ *Lingua* self-consciously defines herself by the same feminine stereotypes. Exhorting herself to attack the Senses, she urges:

Fie *Lingua* wilt thou now degenerate:
Art not a woman, doost not love revenge. A4^{r-v}

This particular characterisation is clearly in part an effect of the university context: it belongs to the traditional long-standing academic anti-feminist stance, interacting with undergraduate humour.⁸ The stereotype would provide a clearly defined and rhetorically familiar role to the male undergraduate who took the part.

So *Lingua*’s characterisation has various contextual roots in both popular and academic tradition. But her female persona also contributes importantly to the ways in which she signifies and reveals contemporary perceptions of spoken language. I aim to explore this, first by looking into how the characterisation of *Lingua* relates to and dramatises aspects of medieval and sixteenth-century language theory, and then by examining in more detail one scene in the play, the hearing before the court of Common Sense, to see how the theoretical questions raised about speech and language are theatricalised. There is no obvious direct source for the play: *Lingua* seems to grow out of various developing concerns of several centuries of language theory, interacting with popular attitudes to both speech and women, all inflected by theatrical interests. This complex of academic, theoretical, social, popular, and theatrical ideas results in a figure who does not, I think, present a wholly coherent view of spoken language, but is certainly a striking dramatic character.⁹

The central conceit of speech demanding recognition as one of the five senses had been seriously proposed by Ramon Llull back at the beginning of the fourteenth century in his *Liber de Affatu, hoc est de sexto sensu*, though it had apparently been very little developed since.¹⁰ Llull focuses on the crucial and positive function of speech in sharing ‘internal conceptions’ — both between the faculties themselves, and between human beings. He advocated, as Mark Johnston suggests, ‘recognition of speech as a sixth sense because, among other reasons, through speech men most

share in loving, best help and understand each other, create knowledge and achieve virtue'.¹¹ These positive arguments build on an already long-standing position, very influentially outlined by Cicero and dominant right through the middle ages and sixteenth century, a position which identified language as the foundation of civilisation itself, and of the pursuit of charity.¹² Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1560) shows this Ciceronian tradition almost unchanged in the mid-sixteenth century: God, says Wilson, 'graunted [men] the gift of utteraunce, that they might with ease win folke at their will, and frame them by reason to all good order ... Neither can I see that men could have been brought by any other meanes, to live together in fellowship of life, to maintaine Cities, to deale truly ... if men at the first had not by art and eloquence, perswaded that which they full oft found out by reason'.¹³ Tomkis's *Lingua* asserts her own worth in arguments drawn directly from this tradition, telling the queen Psyche: 'Her Citties would dissolue, traffique would decay, friendshippes be broken, were not my speech the knot, *Mercury*, and *Mastique*, to binde, defende, and glewe them together' (F3^r).

But while this strand of medieval and sixteenth-century thinking on spoken language dignified it as the source of civilisation, more pragmatic and popular moral discussion of speech tended to focus on its dangers and abuse. From at least the eighth century discussions of the Seven Deadly Sins developed a sub-category of *vitia linguae* — sins of the tongue — usually as a subsection of the vice of *Gula*, through the association with the mouth.¹⁴ These sins almost all concern the over-use of speech, and result in familiar lists such as that in the fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues* which compares the evil tongue to the barren fig tree, identifying the ten branches of that tree as: 'ydel avauntyng, losengerie, apeyre a man bihynde hym, that is bakbityng, lesynges, forswerynges, stryvnynges, grucchynges, rebellynges, blasphemye, that is speke evele of God'.¹⁵ In the early sixteenth century Erasmus developed this 'sins of the tongue' discussion in humanist terms in his long treatise *Lingua* which, while gesturing at the positive uses of language, concentrates heavily on calumny and the destructive effects of uncontrolled speech.¹⁶ Tomkis does not appear to draw directly on any of this well-established anti-tongue literature. But the overall, largely unquestioned, antagonism to Lady *Lingua* in his play suggests that the dangers of speech were in the early seventeenth century still very thoroughly grounded in both common and academic consciousness.

So far this brief survey of medieval and sixteenth-century attitudes broadly suggests a relatively clear, if oppositional view: language itself is valued as the source of human civilisation; but common speech tends to be regarded as dangerous to both individuals and society. The figure of *Lingua* in Tomkis’ play leans towards the dangers rather than the benefits of spoken language. But she is also given more positive arguments, and with her twin pages *Mendacio* and *Veritas*, she continues to demonstrate both strands of this debate.

The sixteenth century saw new developments in ideas about language, especially under the renewed interest in classical learning. For the sake of clarity, although at the risk of over-simplification, this might be summed up in two aspects. On the one hand, as Martin Elsky has persuasively established, humanist scholars began to assert the primacy of speech over more conceptual views of language.¹⁷ Vives, for example, came to focus on *sermo* (the spoken word) rather than *oratio* (the interaction of language and reason) as the basis of language.¹⁸ The Italian Giovanio Pontano equally asserted, ‘we are not at all referring to that part of rhetoric which is called the oratorical power or faculty or art, but only to that common discourse itself by which men ... [carry] out their daily tasks’.¹⁹ On the other hand, while the notion of speech gains a greater theoretical or academic status, the sixteenth century also comes to focus on the inadequacies and dangers of language itself. By the time *Lingua* was performed, Francis Bacon is engaging seriously with the problems language poses for understanding: ‘let us consider the false appearances that are imposed upon us by words, which are framed and applied according to the conceit and capacities of the vulgar sort: and although we think we govern our words ... yet certain it is that words, as a Tartar’s bow, do shoot back upon the understanding of the wisest, and mightily entangle and pervert the judgement’.²⁰ Throughout his work Bacon is concerned with the insecurity of language and the uncertainty of the relationship between word and referent.²¹

The overall climate of opinion that lies behind Tomkis’s dramatic character is therefore complex and ambivalent: language and speech are blessings and curses, benefits and threats, enablers and hinderers of understanding. Although Tomkis engages only playfully with most of these issues, his *Lady Lingua* with her slippery eloquence very clearly reflects her ambivalent ancestry.

A couple of more specific features of the play are worth raising in the context of medieval and Tudor language theory. One of the most obvious is the relentlessly female characterisation of *Lingua*. Is Tomkis’s

personification based only in popular prejudice, or had the language theorists developed a feminised conception of speech, or of language itself, that might influence his characterisation? In spite of the familiar popular attitudes to women and speech, few of the earlier commentators on language, or even on the sins of the tongue, make any explicit connection between language and gender. In fact Erasmus in his treatise on the Tongue actually argues: 'I would address myself especially to women, who commonly are reproached on this score, if I did not see all around me so many foul-tongued men that women appear subdued and restrained in comparison'.²² But there are, perhaps, glimpses of an unarticulated perception of speech as itself 'feminine' in some discussions. The *Book of Vices and Virtues*, for example, overtly ascribes its sins of the tongue more often to men than to women; but the figurative language used to describe these sins is predominantly female. Flatterers (*losengeres*, referred to as male) are said to be like mermaids or sirens, using a fair face to deceive. The liar (gendered male), 'he fareth as a butre-flye, that lyveth bi the aier and hath no thing in hire guttes but wynd, and at every colour that sche seth sche chaungeth hire owne'.²³ In this slippage of gender the qualities of language misuse are imaged as feminine, even while the abusers of language are presented as men.

Nearer in time to *Lingua* we find similarly oblique confirmation of a feminised perception of language in Francis Bacon's passing remark about satirical literature: 'when princes and monarchs have suppressed actual and open rebels, then the malignity of people ... doth bring forth libels and slanders, and taxation of states, which is of the same kind with rebellion, but more feminine'.²⁴ Although both are undertaken by men, rebellious action is seen as male, rebellious language as female. Overall I think it remains likely that Tomkis's primary motivation towards his vividly stereotyped female characterisation is the joke of popular academic anti-feminism. But as with these various theoretical commentators, his feminised theatrical personification implies an inexplicit but potentially powerful feminised conception of language itself.

Another important issue of language theory concerns the relationship of speech to memory and imagination. This emerges especially in the scene where *Lingua* is called to account before the court governed by Common Sense, who is supported by *Memoria* and *Phantastes*. These are two delightful, and delightfully costumed, figures. *Phantastes*, or *Imagination*, is dressed:

in a white Satten dublet of one fashion, greene velvet hose of another. A phantasticall hat with a plume of fethers of severall colours, a short taffata clooke, a paire of Buskins cut, drawne out with sundry coloured Ribands, with scarfes hung about him, after all fashions, and of all collours, ringes, Jewells, a fanne, and in every place other od complements. (D1^v/D2^r)

Memoria, visualised as 'an old decrepit man, in a black Veluet Cassock' (D3^v), offers us a comically irascible perception of the changing values of early modern historicism: in the old days, he claims:

there was few things committed to my charge, but those that were well worthy the preserving, but now every trifle must be wrapped up in the volume of eternitie. A rich pudding-wife, or a Cobler cannot die but I must immortalize his name with an Epitaph: A dog cannot pisse in a Noblemans shoe, but it must be sprinkled into the Chronicles, so that I could never remember my Treasure more full, & never emptier of honorable, and true heroycall actions. (D4^r)

This presents a delightful comment on the shifting nature of historiography anticipating some of the class and contextual concerns of twentieth-century new historicism.²⁵

The play does not itself develop very fully *Lingua's* relationship with either memory or imagination. But it is plainly no coincidence that it is Memoria and Phantastes who sit with Common Sense to judge her. If we look right back, for example, to Lull's account of the working of speech in the *Liber de affatu*, the relationship of speech to both imagination and memory is central. Speech, argues Lull, represents 'imaginable concepts' to the imagination, which can then present them to the soul; equally, speech manifests the operations of memory, thus activating and enabling them.²⁶ Moving forward several hundred years to Bacon's analysis of language at the beginning of the seventeenth century, we find the same concepts underpinning his analysis of speech. Bacon presents language as one of the four 'arts intellectual'. These arts define the processes of cognition: 'man's labour is to *invent* that which is sought or propounded; or to *judge* that which is invented; or to *retain* that which is judged; or to *deliver over* that which is retained'.²⁷ Language belongs to the fourth of these arts: the 'delivery' of that which is invented in the imagination, judged (according to *Lingua's* allegory by Common Sense) and retained in the memory. From the Middle Ages right into the early seventeenth century language is therefore understood in essential relation to the

processes of imagination and memory. Although Tomkis does little to develop their interactions, the characters of *Lingua* are not an arbitrary or original selection but continue long-standing insights into the processes of language.

Having probed a little into the intellectual background that contributes to the personification of *Lingua*, it is worth looking more closely at the central confrontation in the play: the judgement that is finally passed on *Lingua*'s relationship to the Senses. How does Tomkis dramatise this core moment of his theatrical analysis of language? *Lingua* presents both an attack on the senses and a defence of her own status. In her attack she argues, broadly following the analysis of Lull, that 'a sense is a facultie, by which our Queene sitting in her priuy chamber hath intelligence of exterior occurrents' (F3^r). *Lingua* is herself, she says, 'of this nature'. But she argues that the Five Senses are in fact fallible in their function, deceiving Common Sense with 'false evidence'.

O how these senses muffle common sense:
And more, and more with pleasing objects strive,
To dull his judgement and pervert [sic] his will
To their be-hests. (A4^r)

Language, she implies, can offer a defence against the imperfections of sensory perception.

Lingua then moves to justify her own position. She draws readily on familiar Ciceronian rhetorical argument about the civilising function and status of language; but another plank of her defence seems to relate to more recent linguistic theorising. She points out how language escapes the temporal limitation of the senses:

for their knowledge is only of things present, quickly sublimed with the deft file of time; whereas the tongue is able to recount thinges past, and often pronounce things to come, by this meanes re-edifying such Excellencies, as Time and Age doe easily depopulate. (F2^v)

Bacon similarly, if in more complex terms, reflects on this capacity of language:

the affection beholdeth merely the present; the reason beholdeth the future and sum of time. And therefore the present filling the imagination more, reason is commonly vanquished; but after that force of eloquence and persuasion hath made things future and

remote appear as present, then upon the revolt of the imagination
reason prevaieth. (170)

Bacon argues that language's eloquence and persuasion enables reason, by rescuing it from the physical and temporal limitations of the present. So these arguments given to *Lingua*, although only lightly and wittily developed, plainly reflect a familiarity with the concerns of contemporary language theory.

This theoretical alertness makes all the more interesting — if slightly surprising — the response of the Five Senses and the judgement of *Lingua*. The Senses are not brought on to argue their case against her in person, but simply present to the court a list of articles or allegations. The first of these offers an academic in-joke to the university audience:

Imprimis ... under pretence of profiting the people with translations,
shee hath most vilye prostituted the hard misteries of vnknowne
Languages to the prophane eares of the vulgar ... (F3^{r-v})

As vernacular speech, *Lingua* is dragging down the elite community of academia, opening up access to its 'hard misteries', making it easy. The second article, of profound philosophical importance, is skipped over in an undeveloped allegorical reference: 'Art 2: Item, that she hath wrongfully imprisoned a Ladie called *Veritas*' (F3^v). These first two articles are, effectively, the only rationally based objections put forward. The remaining eight turn to traditional anti-feminist insult, familiar but wholly unexamined: 'she's a witch', 'she's a common whore', 'she's a Backbyter', 'shee lends wiues weapons to fight against their husbands', 'she is an incontinent Tel-tale' (F3^v). What we have is a complete shift of register. There is no attempt to present arguments to counter *Lingua*'s reasoned propositions: popular anti-feminism is offered as a (theatrical) answer in itself. This is in fact explicitly summed up in the final article:

Art 10: Item (which is the last and worst) that shee's a Woman in
euery respect and for these causes not to bee admitted to the
dignitie of a Sense. (F3^v)

Common Sense accepts the allegations of the Senses as 'vn-answerable' and pronounces:

wee iudge you to bee no *Sense* simply, onely thus much we from
henceforth pronounce, that all women for your sake shall haue six

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Senses, that is seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and the last and feminine sense, the sense of speaking. (I 4^r)

This scene of judgement sums up particularly sharply the conflicting complex of both influences and techniques in Tomkis's presentation of *Lingua*. Academic knowledge of language theory, intellectual undergraduate humour, popular views of speech and of women, theatrical impulses towards sharply defined, familiar and comic performance — all these feed into the dramatised allegory. The play moves freely between registers: theoretical argument about language in one direction can therefore effectively be countered by theatrical antifeminist images in the other. *Lingua* herself embodies these conflicts: while her arguments, often very respectable, draw on ongoing debates about the nature of language itself, her behaviour enacts the role of the stereotypical malicious and scheming woman. The impulses of theatrical performance interact with, and in the end override, intellectual analysis of the phenomenon and functions of speech. Ultimately no really coherent view of language, or of speech, emerges from this interplay of ideas and dramatic strategies. What the play offers is a delightful forum for 'playing' with the conflicting notions of language that it tosses about for the pleasure of its audience.

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NOTES

1. *Lingua: or The Combat of the Tongue, And the five Senses For Superiority. A pleasant Comoedie* (London: G. Eld for Simon Waterson, 1607). Also in Robert Dodsley *Old Plays* edited W.C. Hazlitt (re-issued New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964) volume 9.
2. Notebook of John Harington, BL Add MS 27632, cited in *Records of Early English Drama: Cambridge* edited Alan Nelson (University of Toronto Press, 1989) 2 853.
3. For further information see Thomas Tomkis *Albumazar: A Comedy* [1615] edited Hugh G. Dick (University of California Publications in English 13; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1944) Introduction.
4. There may also be a connection with the Oxford play *Bellum Grammaticale* (c.1583) which enacted a battle between the parts of speech: see G.C. Moore *Smith College Plays performed in the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge UP, 1923) 8.
5. See Tomkis *Albumazar* Introduction.

6. REED: *Cambridge* 347.
7. *Much Ado about Nothing* 2: 1: 244.
8. The famous and influential near-contemporary Cambridge Latin comedy *Pedantius* made, in passing, the same academic joke that Tomkis elaborates so thoroughly, when the schoolmaster Pedantius explains to his pupil that '*laurea, lingua sunt utraque foeminae generis, sed lingua potissimum*' ('*laurel and tongue are both of the feminine gender, but tongue more so*'), 'and so consequently silence might not by any means have bene of the feminine gender' (REED: *Cambridge* 848).
9. Apart from works mentioned in the footnotes, the following discussion of medieval and Tudor language theory has been informed by Marcia Colish *The Mirror of Language: a Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), and Raffaele Simone 'The Early Modern Period' in *History of Linguistics, Volume 3: Renaissance and Early Modern Linguistics* edited Giulio Lepschy (London and New York: Longman, 1998) chapter 2.
10. Ramon Llull *Liber de Affatu, hoc est de sexto sensu*, published as *Affatus* edited Armand Llinarès and Alexandre Jean Gondras *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 51 (1984) 269–97.
11. 'Literature' *Rhetorica* 4 (1986) 21–46; see also *The Evangelical Rhetoric of Ramon Llull* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 66–9.
12. See Cicero *De Inventione* 1, 2, 2–3; *De Oratore* 32–4; *De Officiis* 1. 50.
13. Thomas Wilson *The Arte of Rhetorique* edited G.H. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909) Preface, Avii^f.
14. See Valerianus (8th century) whose sins of the tongue include the theatre, *PL* 52 706–12; Johnston 'Treatment of Speech' 26–8.
15. *The Book of Vices and Virtues: a 14th Century translation of the Somme le Roi of Lorens d'Orléans* edited W. Nelson Francis EETS OS 217 (London: Oxford UP, 1942) 55: 8–11.
16. Desiderius Erasmus *Lingua* in *Collected Works* 29 edited Elaine Fantham and Erika Rummel (University of Toronto Press, 1989) 219–412, especially introduction 251–2.
17. Martin Elsky *Authorising Words: Speech, Writing and Print in the Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1989) chapter 2 'The Humanists: the Primacy of Speech'.
18. See Elsky's discussion of Vives' *In Pseudodialecticos* in *Authorising Words* 36–7.
19. Giovanio Pontano *De Sermone* 1: 3: 3–4; quoted by Charles Trinkaus in 'The Question of Truth in Renaissance Rhetoric and Anthropology' *Renaissance*

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- Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric* edited James Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 207–20 (quotation 217).
20. Francis Bacon *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (World's Classics; Oxford UP, 1960) 154–5.
 21. See Elsky *Authorising Words* 170–4.
 22. Erasmus *Lingua* 264.
 23. *Book of Vices and Virtues* 60: 27–31.
 24. Bacon *Advancement of Learning* 99.
 25. As David Mills helpfully pointed out at the METH meeting, Memoria's anxieties may well be a response to the effects of Protestant values on the writing of history.
 26. Johnston *Evangelical Rhetoric* 68.
 27. Bacon *Advancement of Learning* 141–2.