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**Breaking the Silence: Jan's Abuse  
of the Power of Language  
in *Boss for Three Days***

That an appreciation for silence was no less important in the Middle Ages than it is now is apparent in the way *Boss for Three Days* reveals the way husbands and wives use and abuse silence. Both husbands, Jan and Imbrecht, praise silence early in the play, setting up the quest for peace and quiet almost as a sacred talisman. Yet later in the play, Jan himself breaks this silence he so desires by continuing to complain and by breaking his verbal promise to his wife Bette. When Jan breaks his silence, he not only loses the power of the language he seems to cherish but also loses the power of mastery in the marriage. If Jan could only practice what he preached, he might not have such a dismal relationship with his wife. In this paper, I will illustrate the importance of silence as presented through the husbands' praise of and yearning for silence, relate this silence to the male view of power in the spousal relationship, show how Jan breaks this silence, and, finally, analyze how this broken silence affects Jan's relationship with his wife.

The dialogue of the play itself reveals the importance of silence to the enactment of the drama. Before the characters even begin that dialogue, the Messenger delivers his opening monologue. In the Middle Ages plays were often enacted in public marketplaces, so the Messenger's function is to quiet the crowds in the marketplace and focus their attention on the platform when the play is about to begin. The Messenger begins and ends his speech with an admonition to be quiet. His opening line, "Now listen, you gentlemen, and be quiet" (1), asks for the audience's attention so that the play may start.

The ending of his speech asks for continued silence: "Now be quiet and be peaceful. / We shall play here right away" (10-11). These requests for silence show from the beginning the importance of silence to the drama itself.

Although the Messenger's requests introduce the idea of silence from the audience, Imbrecht first reveals his desire for peace and quiet in the play proper. In his opening monologue outside the tavern, Imbrecht harangues an unidentified idiot for not keeping quiet: "The idiot, he had to interfere! / And couldn't he keep quiet?" (18-19). It might be that Imbrecht is referring to the Messenger as the idiot or some noisy member of the audience, but it is more likely that he refers to Jan. The lines following, "We play here today for his sake, and with him always babbling away!" (20-21), seem to suggest that Jan is chattering to his wife in another corner of the platform or stage. No matter whom he is referring to, however, Imbrecht clearly wishes that the idiot had not broken the silence.

Jan values silence no less than Imbrecht does. In addition to setting up the background and plot for the play, Jan's long speech to Imbrecht in the first tavern scene reveals his own desire for silence. Jan whines that he never has peace from his wife Bette:

I like to drink in the tavern, but  
then she likes to come and scold  
me  
and then I can't escape...  
I know that she would leave me in  
peace

if I would take her to drink with  
me. (89-91, 96-97)

Jan continues to complain and introduces the boss-for-three-days plan with this statement:

If I could find any way  
to get peace,  
so that I could honorably make her  
keep quiet,  
I would be lord all my days. (106-  
09)

Through this statement, Jan reveals that although the peace may involve respite from Bette's shrewish nature and even physical beatings, his main prerequisite for peace is silence. He continues by planning a bribe for this peace he hungers for:

I thought it good if I gave her a  
a petticoat or a good piece of  
material for a skirt.  
Then perhaps then she would  
leave me in peace. (110-12)

Jan continues to dream of this peace in the ending of his speech to Imbrecht:

If I could have three days of peace,  
perhaps she would like it so much,  
that it could last six months or  
seven,  
and perhaps even all our life. (113-  
16)

Although Imbrecht even suggests that not to keep silent is to be a bad wife — "They are bad wives, who can never be peaceful" (136) — he also talks of the value of keeping silent oneself:

I swear to you, Jan, by St. Nick,  
one must bear for the sake of the  
better  
and sometimes keep completely  
quiet,

even if one dislikes it. (120-23)

The husbands desire quiet from their wives, but they should also understand the need to be quiet at times if they want to keep peace in their homes.

Jan's and Imbrecht's desire for silence reveals their opinion that having the power of silence over another exhibits power in the relationship. Indeed, the ability to keep their wives silent is equal to mastery in the relationship. After making the agreement with Bette, Jan expresses this sentiment before departing for the tavern:

There she sits more quiet than a  
mouse  
and does the best she can.  
I think no one ever saw a better  
wife. (220-22)

Jan perceives himself as master of the household simply because his wife is quiet. Imbrecht agrees that the peace and quiet of another suggests power in the relationship. As Imbrecht explains Jan and Bette's agreement to his own wife, Lijsbet, he describes Jan:

Because he has accomplished  
what never in his life before he  
could do, namely  
he had never done so well with his  
wife  
as upon this day, today.  
But he has his peace  
and rest for only three days. (262-  
67)

Lijsbet, Imbrecht, and finally Bette herself all express doubt about the capabilities and truthfulness of Jan. Lijsbet's thoughts reveal that she does not feel that Jan can keep this power: "I think he will not remain long / thus in peace and quiet" (272-73). Imbrecht expresses some concern over Jan's ability to maintain the peace. When entering Jan's home, Imbrecht expresses his hope that the peace can continue by saying, "God and

St. Michael / keep you in peace here!" (294-95). Although the expression may be simply a general greeting, as "God bless you and give you peace," an alternative reading is that he feels that he must call upon God to keep the peace. If the latter reading is valid, then Imbrecht most likely does not have complete faith in Jan's ability to maintain the peace without this divine assistance. Earlier in the play, Bette shows her knowledge of her husband's true nature by saying,

You would lie, even if it kills you.  
Do you think I don't smell it [the drink]?  
You stand there and rave like a  
chicken!" (158-60)

It seems that none of the main characters shows confidence in Jan.

At Jan's house when all four guests are present, Jan and Imbrecht once again talk of the power of silence. Imbrecht believes that Jan has truly gained mastery because Bette "can give and keep quiet" (309). Imbrecht believes that by being quiet, Bette has become a good wife again because "I have never heard of a bad wife / who became so well-dispositioned" (306-07). Imbrecht feels that Bette can lose mastery in the relationship through losing her language or keeping quiet. When Jan thinks he has the mastery, he says "Don't I speak like a man?" (334). Jan has discovered that he gains power through language, as well as through the power to command silence.

Even though Jan and Imbrecht, the male characters in the play, seem to understand the power that can be gained through language and silence, Jan does not use this knowledge wisely. Instead, he breaks the silence that he has promised. By breaking the silence, Jan brings into reality the worry and doubt that Imbrecht and Lijsbet had expressed about his ability to keep the mastery in the relationship. In Jan and Bette's agreement, Jan promises not to tell anyone about

his deal with Bette. Before Bette will agree to this plan, she stipulates that they must "agree secretly / and let no one know about it" (190-91). Jan immediately agrees by saying, "Oh no, upon my honor / I shall be completely quiet about it" (192-93). Jan quickly breaks this agreement, however, with the first words he utters after leaving the house.

After making the agreement, Jan travels to the tavern, where he rejoins Imbrecht. Imbrecht asks him how things went at home. Reveling in his newfound mastery, Jan reiterates his earlier complaints about his life by reminiscing:

I have been married for twenty  
years and five,  
in which I never had rest inside  
that house.  
What I suffered. How I kept quiet,  
up till now! (244-47)

He complains of lost mastery in the relationship because he had to keep quiet, thereby allowing Bette to usurp the power in the marriage. Even when Jan breaks the silence, his words are false.

Jan persuades Bette to agree to the plan through bribing her with a fur and promises of jewelry. Conversely, when he describes the agreement to Imbrecht, he falsely states his position: "You shall hear how I, by using kind treatment, / am lord of the house in every way" (240-41). Bette would scarcely interpret a gift of a fur as "kind treatment." Then, later, Jan also falsely describes the situation by saying,

And don't you think with regard to  
my manner of speech  
that I can indeed conquer my  
wife?  
I shall make her jump through a  
hoop  
before you depart from here. (360-  
63)

Jan seems to have conveniently forgotten the fur and the promised jewelry. He once again has abused language not only by breaking his silence but also by speaking false words when he does so.

Jan's broken silence directly affects his relationship with his wife and the outcome of their agreement. That broken silence begins a chain of reactions that ruins his plan for mastery in his home. Jan first tells Imbrecht, who in turn tells Lijsbet. Then, Jan brags to Imbrecht about his dominance at his home. Lijsbet overhears this bragging and finally understands why Bette has agreed to give Jan power. Lijsbet becomes furious enough to confront Bette about the situation. Bette probably knew better than to trust her husband with a secret, but Lijsbet's tirade makes it clear to her that Jan has told his neighbor about the deal. When Bette realizes this deception, she takes Lijsbet's advice to heart and ends the charade. If

Jan had kept his promise and kept the silence that he so yearned for, his plan would have worked.

The issue of silence and the power of language appear in action and dialogue throughout the play. In *Boss for Three Days*, the Middle Dutch playwright is able to delineate the power struggle between man and wife through the use and abuse of silence. The playwright stresses the importance of silence through Jan's and Imbrecht's repeated mentionings of their desire for it and their shared notion that the power of silence relates directly to mastery in the marriage relationship. The playwright illustrates that power first by having Jan break his promised silence and then by showing the repercussions of the broken promise. Through the playwright's negative example of Jan, the audience can see that breaking the silence can be as detrimental to the relationship as keeping the silence can be beneficial.