

Your Secret Is Safe with Me
(After Montaigne)

When I had been teaching at the University of Montana only a few years, I encountered the most brazen case of plagiarism I was ever to see. For a Chaucer course a graduate student turned in a verbatim copy of one of the classics of Chaucer scholarship, George Lyman Kittredge's article, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," published in 1912. Page after page the dumb-show went on. Every turn of phrase in the original, every quotation in Middle English, was reproduced. The best to be said about this forgery is that it perhaps wasn't as bad as turning in the Gettysburg Address in a Freshman Composition class.

Here then was a graduate student so lost to reality that she supposed she could pass off a well-known paper by a Harvard professor of the Edwardian era as her own composition. When I asked her if the style and voice of the submitted paper were hers and she stoutly maintained they were, I decided to notify the dean of the graduate school. Upon checking the submission against the original, the dean informed the student that, barring an appeal, she would be summarily expelled from the university. She did not appeal. Justice was swift—but there was a hitch. The dean admonished me never to speak of the case lest word get out and the student lose her job.

The fact is that this student—the most improbable of the many plagiarists I was to meet over my years in the classroom—was employed as a teacher of English at a local high school.

By committing the capital offense of academic life, she received immunity from disciplinary action at the hands of her employer, and this even though she was about the last person in the community to be entrusted with the position of a teacher, if the truth were told. Though I realized the dean was concerned to protect the university from legal liability, his admonition seemed cynical, in the tradition of the employer who gets rid of an incompetent by giving him or her a golden recommendation. All the same, I kept mum as instructed, which is probably why I eventually forgot the student's name.

The idea that you can acquire rights and privileges by doing something sufficiently outrageous seems to me strange, even perverse. In this case it was the university's self-interest that guaranteed that the student's dirty secret wouldn't cost her her position. In other cases third parties who are in on the secret hush up an offender's actions for less material reasons, much as if they felt obligated not to speak of them because they are unspeakable.

As a friend and I were getting to know each other, he suddenly blurted out that some years before (during the first wave of the recovered-memory movement), his then-teenaged daughter accused both him and her mother of abusing her sexually. "And we didn't do a thing, I swear!" The words burst from him as if he had broken some rule that he was never to refer to his daughter's fabrications. Both brilliant and accomplished, he seemed to be living under a gag order imposed by his own child. Possibly if he did insist on speaking of her allegations—the most poisonous she could have made under any circumstances, but all the more so amidst the interpretive frenzy incited by the recovered-memory crusade—he would be accused of dredging up the past or reminded that she had been a confused kid under the influence of a therapist. Though he continued to suffer from his daughter's cruelties, he never again

mentioned her accusations to me. She had done something unspeakable and he didn't speak of it.

A decade after the George Lyman Kittredge incident, a department chair at my university committed a breach of professional conduct that left his colleagues in a state of denial. Imagine a chair so enamored of a crackpot theory he paid a vanity press to publish it because no one else would, and imagine that he then took credit for this volume as a legitimate publication. (This is not what the misguided chair actually did, but comparably outlandish.) Confronted with acts that cried out for investigation but loath to play the inquisitor, the members of the department pretended that nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Like someone struck mute by things that challenge speech and comprehension, they maintained an embarrassed silence and looked the other way. A tree had fallen in the forest unheard. The chair retired in short order—years early—but not because he was forced out.

At work in the reaction or nonreaction of colleagues to the chair's escapade may have been a certain instinct to protect one who exposed his own foolishness so nakedly and heedlessly. A related impulse seemed to inspire a comment by an eminent professor of the humanities at the time the pro-Nazi writings of the youthful Paul de Man (a leading light of the theory and practice of "deconstruction") came to the notice of the world. The professor, here to be called X, and I were guests at a dinner and fell into conversation, in the course of which I mentioned that de Man could perhaps have pled the excuse of youth for churning out pro-Nazi propaganda in occupied Belgium, but had no excuse for concealing his disgraceful history itself. Bristling, X let it be known that Paul (so X called him) was an honorable man and I had no business criticizing what he chose not to speak about. As I interpret this exchange, it was

because de Man could not possibly have defended his duplicitous silence that X undertook to defend it for him. It was as if X were going to the aid of someone helpless, and in that de Man had died some years before his own unmasking, and his reputation was therefore at the mercy of the world, he really was helpless. From a certain point of view, X's attempt to re-fasten the mask to de Man's public image after it had been rudely stripped away resembled the gesture of covering a body lying in the street for all to see.

The instinct to protect the dead from exposure works strongly in me also. I knew well someone whose gravestone is beautifully etched with the words

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VIETNAM

even though, in reality, the deceased never set foot in Southeast Asia and never held the rank of sergeant. Over the years, it seems, he had published these lies to his second wife, and now here they were, defiling the sanctity of a grave. Dozens of such pretenders are exposed by name in *Stolen Valor* by B. G. Burkett, who fact-checked their representations against military records one by one; and yet I could not imagine demolishing the falsehoods of *this* pretender in the same avenging spirit as Burkett. Should I notify the wife of the deceased that her understanding of his history rests on lies, as I know because I corresponded with him in real time, throughout his years in the Air Force? Beware of shaking the foundations of another's world. If I did insist on challenging the falsehoods literally engraved in granite in this instance,

part of me would feel guilty of defacing the memory of the deceased. Once again, because certain lies are unspeakable one feels a strange obligation to uphold them.

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Writes Montaigne in his essay on the power of the imagination, “The sight of another man’s suffering produces physical suffering in me, and my own sensitivity has often misappropriated the feelings of a third party.” So it is with us; and yet sometimes this sympathetic transfer of feelings proceeds counterfactually, as when we take upon ourselves feelings that a third party doesn’t exhibit but perhaps ought to. Because a daughter wrote off her false accusations, her father acted as if *he* had done something that left him chastened and speechless. Colleagues reacted with awkward silence to a deed that showed a reckless disregard for good sense and the actor’s own dignity; in effect, they covered it up. X took a forthright, even combative, stance in defense of a figure (Paul de Man) who was anything but forthright in his own person. I kept mute about an unthinkable misrepresentation of military rank and service—a Falstaffian exaggeration carved into a gravestone.

It’s as if we sought to preserve decency by denying that violations of decency have taken place.

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