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Introduction

Geoff Kemp

Censorship has been a part of human experience for at least 2,500 years and in that period has been a recurring presence for political thought, whether as active repression, a shaping context for expression, or as itself an object of analysis and argument. From the conviction and death of Socrates to Milton's *Areopagitica* to twenty-first-century Chinese protesters echoing a mythologized Western past – 'I disagree with what you say but will defend to the death your right to say it!' – acts of silencing have provoked passionate and often penetrating responses that speak to the historical moment and to a longer-term agenda of political and personal ideas, aims and conflicts.¹ Thinking and writing about the regulation of thinking, speaking and writing is a thread running through past political discourse, and the questions raised and problems addressed remain a relevant and important part of our political present. *Censorship Moments* provides a ready point of access to a range of contributions to that thread, offering new essays on past 'censorship texts' in the innovative format of the series in which the book appears.

The importance of thinking more about censorship's past arises not least because, in the Western self-image, censorship *is* the past, an idea left behind, and free expression is the present and future. The familiar narrative is that of censorship by state and church being subordinated to freedom of expression, politically and intellectually, over the last few centuries, as part of a shift to modernity marked by the ascendancy of liberty and rights, toleration and secularism, popular sovereignty and state neutrality, and a capitalist industrial order whose powers included making media central to all our lives. As a result, free speech and a free press became enthroned at the right hand of modern democracy, attended by the First Amendment and Fourth Estate, and cloaked in memorable phrases. Opposition to censorship is central to our political creed, its past stirred in public memory as a struggle by word and deed against the forces of repression. It may be complained that a commitment to freedom of expression is today proclaimed more than practised by governments and others

(along with not being proclaimed universally enough), though this has an air of paradox. If espousing ideas is ‘only words’, of no consequence, there would seem no need to regulate words in practice, or indeed protect them, inviting instead a kind of ‘liberalism by default’. Censorship is the homage paid to the power of words and images.

The advance of freedom of expression over censorship is, by common agreement, one of the most notable of human advances. While no pre-modern European state had the practical and conceptual tools to aspire to be truly ‘totalitarian’, it was equally the case that no state countenanced immunity from the threat of punishment for subjects uttering words it hated, particularly those judged to be seditious or impious. The threat was present for all persons, high and low, literate and illiterate, but loomed more immediately for writers on politics and religion, a condition of insecurity that discouraged arts and letters though was never a complete deterrent. John Aubrey’s report that the Anglican bishops wanted Thomas Hobbes burned as a heretic in the 1660s was hyperbole, though mainly because burning for heresy was seen as the Roman Inquisition’s style, whereas the English way was burning books, mutilating religious dissenters on charges of seditious libel and executing printers for treason. Yet by the close of the century, England had forsaken pre-publication licensing and acquired a Toleration Act; a century later, the United States codified freedom of thought and expression in the First Amendment. The exchange of a dangerously uncertain world for one of relative security is a gain that no one who studies the history of ideas will fail to appreciate, or indeed anyone living in modern constitutional democracy.

The question can be asked, however, whether free expression displaced censorship as ‘master narrative’ at the cost of partly suppressing how it did so, discouraging attention to the diverse dimensions of the subject. In ending up on the right side of the argument, so to speak, freedom of expression encouraged a Manichean assumption that there were plainly two sides in dispute from the beginning, in the process condemning the other side to the dark ages before enlightenment. The story of censorship becomes one told from its ostensible end, at the threshold of defeat by free expression, prior to which its character can be assumed because censorship has ‘the same characteristics in every era.’² Arguments in the present readily become struggles to label an intervention ‘censorship’ and delegitimize it by definition, since every right-thinking person is against censorship.

An example might be the mainstream debate in and around the recent Leveson Inquiry into the British press. Leveson’s report declares that press

freedom was ‘hard won’ as ‘one of the cornerstones of our democracy’, invoking Thomas Jefferson and drawing subsequently on John Stuart Mill, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Wilkes, George Orwell and Milton’s ‘immortal’ *Areopagitica*. Having traced historical opposition to government licensing and censorship, the report observes that a primary argument currently advanced against action on press abuses relies on a ‘mistaken conflation’ of state censorship with the ordinary democratic processes of statute law. Leveson’s view that there is no necessary connection is taken to be confirmed by his resort to history, conveying ideas of press freedom serving the public interest.³ The concerted response of the majority of British national newspapers was to continue to run the story of possible intervention as ‘300 years of freedom under threat’ and ‘CENSORED’, shrinking an already limited historical horizon to headline slogans.⁴

Leveson’s inquiry and academic inquiry alike have limits but an aim of this book is to contribute to widening the horizon, historically and intellectually, by scrutinizing a range of ‘moments’ over the past two millennia when thinkers addressed the theme of censorship, conveying the variability of ideas about censorship and free expression without precluding the tracing of conceptual patterns and historical trajectories. In doing so, the book’s aim chimes with recent scholarship emphasizing ‘moments of censorship’ rather than timeless repression, and with the broader movement towards contextual understanding in the study of the history of political thought.⁵

The relationship between censorship and political thought is aptly conceived in terms of ‘moments’. The introduction to *Utopian Moments*, the first volume in this series, remarked that attention to censorship ‘rarely tells anything like the full story’ about a work, criticizing a tendency to view utopian writing merely as a device to evade the censor (p. xvi). The comment carries another resonance, however, because censorship has indeed rarely, if ever, been the ‘full story’ of any extended political or theoretical work in the past. This claim may sit oddly with the idea of free expression rising to be a cornerstone of democracy, though partly this is because the ascent itself fostered expectations of expansive, clear-cut and free-standing denunciations of censorship. Yet when we look back, the literary-political ‘cornerstones’ of the tradition in English have been a forty-page pamphlet (*Areopagitica*), a sixty-eight-page chapter (in Mill’s *On Liberty*), and scattered utterances of writers, politicians and judges, amplified by an expanding consciousness of the freedom through beneficiaries such as the press, along with the scholarly systemization of the tradition and concept.

In *not* constituting the ‘full story’ of a work, however, censorship may be no less important to the study of the history of ideas. One reason is that moments

of active repression, or the concern to avoid them, shape the text and can inform its interpretation. Political thought itself is not solely 'thought' but expression and communication too, susceptible to intervention by authority. But another consideration is the way in which reflection or comment within the text about the control or freedom of thinking, expressing and communicating is itself a moment of political thought, as a rule. The concerns and concepts which writers articulate in relation to censorship typically connect to the central themes of the history of political thought. They engage, or touch on, questions of authority, law, sovereignty, liberty, rights, toleration, deliberation, legitimacy, the public and private, equality and others. The concerns of censorship and free expression flow alongside the mainstream of past political discourse, sometimes submerged under pressing political and philosophical matters but surfacing at moments such as those forming the basis of this book.

Censorship Moments provides fresh readings of a range of well-known works and thinkers, as well as novel interpretations of less well-known texts, and of two printed images, viewing all these works through the prism of censorship and free expression. The essays begin by presenting a 'textual moment' – a quotation or image – which serves as a springboard to engage with the subject in various ways: a closer reading of the work as a whole, a clearer view of the author's purposes, an awareness of relevant contexts, enhanced grasp of concepts and connections with wider thinking. An international team of experts has been gathered, with each asked to provide a short and accessible account, keeping scholarly apparatus to a minimum but intellectual insight to the fore. The hope is that the essays will stimulate thought and lead to further critical reading of the featured texts and others.

The choice of texts and authors is necessarily highly selective in covering a long time span and a diverse range of historical and political texts and agendas. As a book about past political thought, the main focus is official and overt censorship, by state and church, applied to political and religious expression, though the boundaries are porous. Prior restraint and subsequent punishment both feature. There is a place for famous 'moments,' such as the death of Socrates and burning of Michel Servetus, and attention to celebrated names in the Anglo-American free speech tradition, including Milton, Mill, Holmes and James Madison. They are joined by major writers and thinkers from the wider realm studied by historians of ideas, extending geographical and chronological borders, without pretending to universal coverage, and incorporating defenders of censorship. There is consideration of Plutarch, Tacitus, Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Constant and Lenin, as well as the less

canonical figures of Johannes Reuchlin, Castellio, Paolo Sarpi, Henry Parker and, more indirectly, Calvin, Hume, Tocqueville and others. The bias is towards published writing, the mainstay of political thought, but the role of speech is prominent and two chapters of the book examine images: William Marshall's frontispiece to *Eikon Basilike* and the satirical print *The Royal Shambles*, by William Hone and George Cruikshank. The penultimate chapter addresses the relation of censorship to interpretation, through Leo Strauss, and the final chapter considers the silencing of women, with Catharine MacKinnon's *Only Words* as the starting point.

The final part of this introduction draws brief attention to a number of themes with which chapters engage, while recognizing the variability of ideas relating to censorship across time, place and circumstances. Perhaps the readiest way to confirm the variability of a notion of 'censorship' over time is to point out that for most of the past two millennia the word has not been taken to mean what we generally take it to mean, and did not have today's negative connotations. Until well into the nineteenth century, the term 'censorship' mainly recalled, usually positively, the ancient Roman office of Censor, whose duties embraced public accounting (via the census), alongside oversight of *mores* in society and integrity in the senate. An idiosyncratic survival is the title of a college fellow at Christ Church, Oxford, where John Locke's memorial tablet informs visitors that he too was once 'Censor of Moral Philosophy', thirty years before helping end pre-publication censorship in England. The most famous of Roman Censors, Cato, is the subject of the first chapter, with ancient and modern senses of censorship also linked in the essays on Tacitus and Rousseau.

It is worth pausing to consider the history of how the words 'censor' and 'censorship' acquired their modern English meaning, which tracks the emergence of representative government as a principle and practice centred on authorization tied to accountability. Milton's isolated reference to the 'censor's hand' in *Areopagitica* preceded the linking of the classical meaning to print from the early eighteenth century, though not as state-imposed press control but by periodical writers proclaiming themselves censors of society's virtue, in the Roman manner but bringing nascent public opinion to bear on transgressions. From this moral and literary beginning emerged the claim that the press could bring the power of the public to bear on politicians' virtue or vice, encapsulated towards the end of the century in Jefferson's contention (echoed by Madison) that 'the people are the only censors of their governors', and newspapers the vehicle of censorial public opinion. Later in the next century, Mill's famous fear

was public opinion's 'hostile and dreaded censorship' of individual belief and behaviour, guiding a government 'identified with the people'. In the decades around *On Liberty*, 'censorship' consolidated its passage to the term and evaluation recognizable today, describing official, primarily state regulation of expression, decried in liberal circles. The accountability function of censorship was meanwhile assumed by the 'Fourth Estate', censuring and correcting government in the public's name and claiming freedom from state censorship to do so. Writers were now the anti-censors, not the censors.

Viewing the past through the lens of censorship in its modern sense allows the examination of a range of concerns broached by past writers, who generally lacked our usage of the term. 'State' censorship itself is seen in various forms, being more and less identified with the people: the liberty and constraint implied in the public free speech of the citizen body of democratic Athens; censorship by the political executive from Roman emperors to the European monarchies; the challenge to monarchical censorship by proponents of representative government; and in turn the resistance to censorship at the hand of elected government. Of course, this is too summary and linear to convey the complexity of the accounts given, and a similar caveat applies in noting the prominence of ecclesiastical censorship, from the archetypal censorship of the Roman church and its *Index Expurgatorius*, detailed here via *Areopagitica*'s major source, 'Padre Paolo' Sarpi, to the restraints and punishments imposed by Protestant authorities. Most frequently, however, censorship marked a joint effort of spiritual and political authority, an often unstable combination.

State and church censorship of political and religious expression does not exhaust the categories addressed. A broader concern with societal censoriousness is explored in Mill, and its positive potential in Rousseau, a reading emphasizing the non-coercive reinforcement of virtue. The potential for politics itself to censor, forcing the quest for truth into a compromise with peaceable popular acceptance, is broached in Augustine and Strauss. Several essays consider, in different ways, forms of 'market censorship': Kant's descent from philosophy to the prosaic problem of book piracy; the coincidence of Holmes and Lenin advancing views on the 'market of ideas' in 1919; and Orwell's protest at a left-leaning literary and publishing establishment obstructing criticism of the Soviet Union. In the final chapter, the (non-) censorship of pornography is at issue.

Extending the book's timescale back beyond the modern free speech narrative brings to the fore disputes over religious belief and defences of censorship, while belying simple divisions of religious and secular, pro- and anti-censorship. Religious censorship appears archetypal to modern eyes

because of the propensity to target opinions alone, literally beliefs of no earthly use, and not clearly harmful. However, what can be called the heresy model is complicated in several ways when interpreting thinkers who believed heresy carried the ultimate cost. Augustine's 'compelle intrare' directed towards the Donatists is linked here to Machiavellian *realpolitik* in a context where no higher *political* morality is mandated. Ockham confronts the dilemma of how to respond to a putatively infallible papal authority that confirms its own heresy in censoring his allegedly heretical writings. Aquinas is shown to have approached transgression by words not as a matter for heresy law, a later model whose opposite is individual liberty rights, but by drawing on Roman law concepts of injurious words and 'sins of the tongue', emphasizing the dignity rights of those harmed and the motivations of the harmers. The connection to debates about hate speech is striking.

Two broader themes suggested in the foregoing discussion are worth amplifying. They might be loosely categorized as the relations between opinions and actions, and between opinions and public opinion. The first category can be divided further, into questions concerning what actions are taken against opinions, whether opinions constitute actions, and what actions stem from opinions, including the familiar issue of harm.

Discussion of the type, focus and degree of action taken against expression shows considerable variety. Castello 'hated heretics' but hated their destruction more, in the tradition of the spiritual weapon being the word, not the sword; Reuchlin opposed banning Jewish texts (and the Qur'an) on a blanket supposition of heresy; Madison extended opposition from pre-publication to post-publication measures because of their 'chilling effect'; Hume's own punishment was 'censorship' by university (non-)appointment.

Whether thought in words constitutes deeds, forms of outward action prone to punishment, is a question raised by numerous writers, notably Spinoza, overlapping with the question of whether and when words cause harms that authority might legitimately seek to control. If Mill is an obvious source here, so too is Cato's stunning accusation that Socrates sought a tyranny of words, inviting acts of questioning that undermined the virtuous deeds on which republics depended. As suggested earlier, the very idea of censorship seems to concede much power to words, images, ideas, speech and writing. It is because they are powerful that they need to be controlled. A number of essays play around the notion that there may be forms of society in which ideas are rendered less powerful (by bread and circuses, consumerism, the corruption of language and even the self-assurance of rulers) and thereby censorship becomes

redundant, producing 'liberalism by default', in effect: if ideas do not matter, their circulation does not need to be regulated.

The question of harms also raises that of intention, with Aquinas's notion of verbal 'sins' giving priority to intent over propositional content, while the problem of assessing intent in turn raises issues of interpretation: Tacitus depicts Cremutius Cordus being censored for insufficient praise, not overt criticism; Kant is found to use disingenuous flattery in deflecting censorship; Spinoza and Hume make ironic use of Tacitus's praise of the rare good fortune of the writer living in a time of freedom.

The second of our larger categories, the relation of opinions and public opinion, returns us to the question of whether censorship most offends against individual belief and expression (the heresy model) or against collective self-determination, forged through open deliberation and accountable government, as well as whether the latter may invite regulation in the public interest. Constant rejects as the basis for press freedom the possibilities of public opinion forged in tandem with the state (the early view of Guizot) or by associations outside the state (the later view of Tocqueville), emphasising defence of individuality as its foundation, the key notion for others such as Mill and Orwell. At the same time, individual opinion is not seen only as self-expression, with a recurring theme being dialogue or deliberation, a relevant one for contemporary thought, though like censorship appearing in varied guises. Ockham's 'heresy' is a matter of conscience but securing religious truth is also a matter of allowing 'dissenting voices', at appropriate levels; Milton's similar thinking runs counter to Parker's support for censorship, but both are committed to a process of deliberation oriented to non-arbitrary political outcomes, the political 'truth'. Kant emphasizes the freedom to think in common; Calvin rejects dialogue as a source of true knowledge, since this places knowledge before faith.

The world evoked in these essays and the ideas of censorship and free expression they convey are by turns alien and familiar. Those who fear for the fragility of the free speech tradition may prefer to find comfort in simple certainties, but arguably they underestimate the complexity of their subject in the present as much as in the past. An example which runs through the book is the complex relationship between official, public, overt censorship and self-censorship or hegemonic/social censorship. Censorship's past is not all burning books, though books were burned; it is also the books that were never written. The history of political thought rests on the more hopeful fact that books are survivors. It is hoped that this book will provoke thought, extend knowledge of past thinkers and encourage further inquiry.

Cato the Censor and Socrates the Tyrant

Arlene W. Saxonhouse

When he was now well on in years, there came as ambassadors from Athens to Rome, Carneades the Academic, and Diogenes the Stoic philosopher ... Upon the arrival of these philosophers, the most studious of the city's youth became their devoted and admiring listeners. ... But Cato, at the very outset, when this zeal for discussion came pouring into the city, was distressed, fearing lest the young men, by giving this direction to their ambition, should come to love a reputation based on mere words more than one achieved by martial deeds. And when the fame of the visiting philosophers rose yet higher in the city ... Cato determined ... to rid and purge the city of them all. So he rose in the Senate and censured the magistrates for keeping in such long suspense an embassy composed of men who could easily secure anything they wished, so persuasive were they. 'We ought', he said, 'to make up our minds ... and vote on what the embassy proposes, in order that these men may return to their schools and lecture to the sons of Greece, while the youth of Rome give ear to their laws and magistrates, as heretofore.' This he did, not, as some think, out of personal hostility to Carneades, but because he was wholly averse to philosophy, and made mock of all Greek culture and training, out of patriotic zeal. He says, for instance, that Socrates was a mighty prattler, who attempted, as best he could, to be his country's tyrant, by abolishing its customs, and by enticing his fellow citizens into opinions contrary to the laws. ... And seeking to prejudice his son against Greek culture, he ... declar[es], in the tone of a prophet or a seer, that Rome would lose her empire when she had become infected with Greek letters.¹

Thus writes Plutarch about Cato the Censor. Plutarch, often described as a 'Platonist' because of his many writings exploring Platonic themes, nevertheless is mostly known for his *Parallel Lives* telling of notable historical or semi-historical Greeks and Romans. As Plutarch follows his characters from birth to

death, questions of character, virtue and vice provide cohesion for his studies. In the preface to his life of Alexander, Plutarch emphasizes that he is writing 'lives' and not histories. To write a life, for him, means to capture his subject's moral character. He explains: 'In the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice. A slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall.' He compares himself to a painter who finds 'character' in 'the face and the expression of the eyes' rather than in the 'other parts of the body'. Thus, he asks to be allowed to devote himself to 'the signs of the souls of men' and let others deal with great battles and 'more weighty matters'.²

The quotation at the head of this chapter is just such an anecdote, intended to illuminate the character, the virtues and the vices, of Marcus Cato, active in Rome during the first half of the second century BCE. We learn early on from Plutarch's 'Life' that Cato led a frugal and temperate life, working in the fields alongside his slaves, scorning profligacy and ostentation. Plutarch reports that Cato 'tells us that he never wore clothing worth more than a hundred drachmas; that he drank ... the same wine as his slaves' (4.3). Stories about his ascetic ways were legion and his pithy aphorisms about the deformity of vice point to Cato's impatience with those who had abandoned the virtues and moral rectitude of early Rome. The enmity between himself and the great Roman general Scipio, the protector of Rome against Hannibal, for instance, arose from Cato's criticism of Scipio's financial generosity to his soldiers. Such generosity, Cato claimed, would corrupt 'the native simplicity of his soldiers, who resorted to wanton pleasures when their pay exceeded their actual needs' (3.5). Cato openly denounced Scipio in the Senate as one 'whose boyish addiction to palaestras and theatres' suggested a 'Master of a festival' and not a 'commander of an army' (3.7).

At the same time as Plutarch records such 'signs of [Cato's] soul', he also traces Cato's rise from obscurity to political power, such that he is first elected Consul and, most importantly, ten years later Censor. The Censorship was a position that (in Plutarch's words) 'towered ... above every other civic honour, and was, in a way, the culmination of a political career' (16.1). Plutarch explains the position and functions of the Roman Censor, two of whom were elected each year:

The variety of its powers was great, including that of examining into the lives and manners of the citizens. Its creators thought that no one should be left to his own devices and desires, without inspection and review, either in his marriage, or in the begetting of his children, or in the ordering of his daily life, or in the entertainment of his friends.

In language recalling his own practice of assessing human character, Plutarch adds that the Romans, 'thinking that these things revealed a man's real character more than did his public and political career, they set men in office to watch, admonish, and chastise, that no one should turn aside to wantonness and forsake his native and customary mode of life'. These Censors 'had authority to degrade a knight, or to expel a senator who led an unbridled and disorderly life' (16.1–16.2).³ Plutarch's account underscores the differences, while anticipating the connection, between the Roman Censorship and later understandings of censorship as the control of expression.

Ancient Roman historians such as Sallust and Livy attribute Rome's spectacular development to the virtue of her citizens, whether the private virtue of chastity exemplified by Lucretia, whose suicide after being raped led to the overthrow of the kings, or Horatio's courage defending the bridge against the invading Etruscans. The decline of Rome, as imagined by Sallust in particular, followed the abandonment of those virtues and the purpose of writing history was to offer *exempla* of such deeds for the Roman youth to emulate. Like their ancestors, they were to devote themselves to the glory of the Republic, irrespective of the cost to themselves. Censorship, therefore, in its initial formulation, was to prevent the loss of those virtues that were judged the source and foundation of Rome's greatness. The Censor intervened in the lives of citizens insofar as such interventions might preserve that ancient morality essential to the stability and success of the polity. Through the office of the Censor the Romans institutionalized efforts to maintain that citizen virtue. It would, they hoped, ensure that the profligacy that might arise from the riches flowing into Rome as the result of her imperial expansion did not undermine the moral fibre of just those citizens who would serve as soldiers and as models for the young. Profligacy was not simply a personal vice; it undermined the entire political body.

Cato, as a practitioner of the modest hard-working life with little time for private pleasures, was the perfect candidate for an office devoted to protecting Rome from the incursion of what were feared as alien and threatening mores and practices. And just as threatening to the ancient Roman virtues as the wealth and customs of the nations that Rome was conquering was Greek philosophy, bound up as it was with questioning all things and with its emphasis on the power of speech rather than deeds. Thus, Rome needed to be rid of those representatives of Greek philosophy, Carneades the Academic Sceptic (who could argue for justice one day and make the opposite argument the next) and Diogenes the Stoic, before their practices of philosophic

questioning could infect Rome's youth. The danger that Cato perceives from the visiting Greeks leads Plutarch to report Cato's infamous remark about Socrates' tyrannical ambitions. Earlier in the 'Life', when Plutarch was noting Cato's excellence as a father, he quotes Cato's remark: 'There was nothing else to admire in Socrates of old except that he was always kind and gentle in his intercourse with a shrewish wife and stupid sons' (20.2) – a backhanded compliment if ever there was one.

Cato's attitude towards Socrates sits uneasily next to the sort of praise that Socrates has earned from others, both ancient and modern. Plato ends the *Phaedo*, his dialogue recounting the death of Socrates, calling Socrates the 'best and wisest and most just' of all men who lived in their time.⁴ According to Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Socrates, 'by letting his own light shine, ... led his disciples to hope that they through imitation of him would attain to such excellence'.⁵ John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* writes, 'Mankind can hardly be too often reminded, that there was once a man named Socrates' who was 'the head and prototype of all subsequent teachers of virtue'. Cato, however, was not so easily drawn into this chorus of admirers. And while Plato, Xenophon and Mill all express their dismay or even horror at the execution of the man who (in Mill's language) 'probably of all then born had deserved best of mankind', Cato ascribes to Socrates the most hated name, for Romans, of 'tyrant'.⁶ Concerned as Cato was with maintaining the greatness of the Republic, he portrays Socrates as a threat to the city and its young.

Though the lives of both Cato and Socrates were marked by moderation and abstinence, Cato sensed in Socratic philosophy a threat to the traditional virtues of the city – one based on Socrates' claim that his wisdom lay in knowing that he did not know. Cato saw in his own life of hard work and devotion to Rome, in his refusal to drink the best wines, eat the finest delicacies or wear jewel-encrusted robes, a commitment to carrying on the founding principles of those who had built and guided Rome in its early years. As Censor he was entrusted with preserving what was now threatened by the new sources of honour. Scipio, indulging his soldiers with wealth and land, fostered a focus on sensual satisfactions, thereby weakening the bodies with which they might fight for Rome. Philosophy's crime was to make men find power and success in speech rather than in the deeds, the austere practices and values of republican Rome. Socrates had urged his followers to question the ancient mores, not to venerate them, and to see inherent contradictions in their assumed certainties. The speech of such a man could dismantle the laws and tradition that preserved and protected the polity about which Cato cared so deeply.

In a peculiar section of Plato's *Apology*, Socrates allies himself with Achilles, the great Homeric hero, who willingly faced death, fearing more to live as a coward than not avenge the death of his comrade Patroclus. Like Achilles, Socrates also willingly faces death, but the absurdity of this assimilation of the glorious demigod and noble warrior to the stooped, bug-eyed, snub-nosed old man would have been apparent to all. The analogy between himself and Achilles mocks the traditional hero who performed great deeds on the battlefield. Socrates offends Cato's principles even more when he explains his decision to remove himself from traditional forms of political engagement: 'A man who really fights for the right, if he is to preserve his life for even a little while, must be a private citizen, not a public man' (32a). As a private man he talks to all, young and old, citizen and foreigner (30a). His conversations serve the city not by supporting its ancient traditions, but by unsettling the city. Outrageously calling himself a gift from the gods, he explains (in what he calls a laughable image) that he is a gadfly biting the large sleepy horse that is Athens, reproaching her citizens for not caring truly about justice and the other virtues, for being too complacent to allow philosophic inquiry to distract them from their daily lives (29e). But just like the horse with the gadfly that is biting it, he predicts that Athens is likely to slap at him and easily kill him – and so they do.

Scholars have suggested multiple reasons for Socrates' execution by the Athenian democracy in 399 BCE,⁷ but none has given much credence to Cato's suggestion that Socrates longed for tyranny. Should they? Xenophon, as he tries to defend Socrates against accusations of corrupting the youth, explores the sources of those accusations. He cites one accuser who said that Socrates taught his companions to 'despise the established laws by insisting on the folly of appointing public officials by lot', something that would not be done when choosing the pilot of a ship. This, the accuser argued, 'led the young to despise the established constitution and made them violent' (I.2.9). Xenophon also describes Socrates' relationship with Critias (who later became one of the Thirty Tyrants installed by the Spartans at Athens after they defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War) and Alcibiades, the flamboyant and 'insolent' (according to Xenophon) Athenian general who eventually defected first to the Spartans and then to the Persians. Xenophon explains that these two came to Socrates as ambitious young men who admired his independence and especially his ability to control others through speech. They hoped that by associating with Socrates they would 'attain the utmost facility in speech and action'. Once they acquired that facility, however, they no longer needed Socrates and pursued political power on their own. Socrates' philosophic explorations gave them tools for

acquiring power, Xenophon argues, but they themselves were responsible for using that power as they did (I.2.12–I.2.16). And yet, without a Socrates, they would have lacked the verbal skills to achieve their political goals.

In Plato's version of the *Apology*, Socrates credits the prejudices against himself in part to Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds*. The story told there matches just what Xenophon tries to discount. Socrates, the teacher of the art of speech that can make the worse cause appear the better, enables one practising that art to become powerful. The principles behind this art of speaking surface in *The Clouds* in a speech offered in Socrates' supposed school, the Thinkery. A figure cast as 'Unjust Speech' articulates Socrates' new education, one that mocks virtues like moderation.⁸ A heavily indebted Athenian whom Aristophanes calls Strepsiades has sent his son to Socrates' school to learn this art of speech so that he might help his father weasel out of his debts. The problem set by the comedy, though, is that the son learns the lessons too well and justifies through argument beating his father and then also his mother. Strepsiades comes to realize the consequences of urging his son to study with Socrates. If a son can beat his mother, what else is open to him? Not only is the economic foundation of the city threatened, but, in Aristophanes' portrayal, the family itself disappears with Socrates' new education. Realizing this, Strepsiades is beside himself; his response is to burn down Socrates' school, to destroy those who mock the old and introduce those new arts that undermine the traditional forms of self-discipline and grant power to those who know how to manipulate words rather than perform well.

Power in this tale derives from speech, not moral virtue. An education that develops such mental agility threatens the security of the political body; it questions the old, unsettles the givens according to which the young have been raised, mocks the ancient heroes and opens the door for new sources of power, especially tyrannical power. Strepsiades uses the only resource he has to fight the threat: fire. The Athenians had grander resources than fire, namely a legal system that allowed those threatened by Socrates to indict him on the charges of corrupting the young and introducing new gods into the city. While we may find Socrates honourable in his efforts to unsettle the Athenians, the Athenians themselves (and Cato) saw the dangers that Socrates posed to the fabric of Athenian society by practising such 'corrosive' citizenship.⁹ For Cato, Socrates – and by association philosophy – corrupts the young; those later representatives of philosophy, Carneades and Diogenes, likewise threaten to corrupt Roman youth as Socrates corrupted the young of Athens.

Socrates' execution troubles modern readers. Democratic Athens created no such office as the Censor. Indeed, they prided themselves on their practice of free/frank speech (*parrhêsia*), naming one of the city's ships *Parrhêsia*, and Socrates in several Platonic dialogues prided himself on practising *parrhêsia*. Yet, the Athenians also discovered the challenges of allowing for unbridled *parrhêsia*. The term itself entails more than the modern language of 'free speech'; it emphasizes daring, a willingness to question authority, a freedom to speak what one truly believes, without dissimulation or flattery. *Parrhêsia* (and *isegoria*, equal freedom to speak) lay at the heart of a democratic Athens that depended on the open discussion of issues confronting the city: war, peace, expansion, taxes. But the city nevertheless found itself threatened by this practice. The boldness to speak openly can also – as in Socrates's case – trigger a lack of reverence for the foundational principles of the society in which such unlimited speech is enjoyed. The challenges that Socrates posed to the accepted definitions of moral terms – 'courage', 'virtue', 'piety', 'moderation', 'justice' – and the way he flustered his interlocutors when he interrogated them about the meaning of such words may have fully expressed this democratic *parrhêsia*, but it also captured the fundamental tension in a democracy that relies on openness but also suffers from the instability created by philosophic questioning.

The universal adoration of Socrates over time makes Cato's description of Socrates shocking. A prattling old man talking with the young could hardly be a tyrannical threat to the city – and yet, precisely by daring to urge the youth to question the givens of their moral lives, he was. Strepsiades recognized it, though the solution to the threat he posed was crude. Socrates' accusers in Athens recognized it and executed him. Cato recognized it and as Censor, the defender of moderation, asceticism and the ancient virtues, thus demanded the banishment of philosophy from Rome. It was all part of his effort to protect the young from the 'corrosive' practice that would undermine a devotion to the Republic and introduce into the city a dangerous new source of political power, the facility with words.