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INTRODUCTION

Taking Liberties
Poetry and the Liberty of Speech

This is a book about the relationship of the liberty of speech to the outpouring of innovative poetic forms in the English Renaissance. *Parrhesia* (in Greek) and *licentia* (in Latin) may be variously translated as bold and open speech, frank speech, or fearless speech.[1] A 1583 dictionary definition holds that it is "license" or "leaue to say or doo what a man listeth without being reproued or punished." *Licentia* is thus virtually interchangeable with *libertas*, defined as "freedom, libertie to speake and liue as one listeth."[2] It may be venerated as the hallmark virtue of free republics or stigmatized as licentious abuse in more authoritarian governments, including empires, monarchies, and oligarchies. Whether revered or despised and feared, *parrhesia* emerges from an ancient value within moral philosophy for the right and duty of citizens to speak the full contents of their minds openly and without fear of retribution. Reading the inventiveness of English Renaissance poetry in relation to *parrhesia*, as it persists through changes of regimes and constitution, is the inverse of reading poetry in response to the culture of censorship, which requires writers to fall silent or offer political critiques calibrated to the shifting boundaries of authority and chiefly the Crown.[3] To approach the rise of fiction in relationship to *parrhesia* is to see poetry as a forum in which the boldness, if not the openness, of speech may survive and flourish even in forbidding times.

Parrhesia

What we have understood as an essential political right of citizens in the Athenian democracy came to classical Rome as a prized but threatened virtue. While its heyday in Rome coincided with the republic, it endured even in the beginning of Augustus Caesar's regime, when the prince prided himself on the value he placed on the liberty of speech. Yet *parrhesia* suffered a fall from the golden age of Augustus's early regime to the iron

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one of his later years, when the prince grew intolerant of the freedom of speech.[4] Viewed from the lens of historical change, *licentia* dwindled from a right theoretically enjoyed by all citizens to a threatened privilege of the equestrian class and, finally, to a liberty enjoyed only by the prince, who asserted his additional prerogative to interpret the speech, writing, and even thoughts of his subjects at will or whim.[5] The enduring value for *parrhesia* in ancient Rome offered a rich vein for exploration by the citizen-subjects of England, whose mixed constitution (both royal and politic) contained imperial and republican values alike. The freedom of speech, as David Colclough observes, marked the difference between thinking of English men and women as articulate citizens of the commonwealth or subjects of the monarch.[6]

The liberty of speech, moreover, has ancient ties to the concept of poetic license, which espouses a freedom from constraint in expression and verbal daring. This license in part descends from the poetic forms of ancient Athens, where comedy and satire responded to the abuses of powerful citizens with no-holds-barred mockery and a willingness to name names. Yet the value of *parrhesia* only grew when poets forfeited the verbal privileges of ancient genres in the updated forms of Roman New Comedy (Plautus and Terence, following Menander rather than Aristophanes) and Horatian satire, which were both self-conscious about adopting comparatively decorous and less formally free or "wild" shapes. To generalize the critiques of social and political discipline in ancient poetry was to sacrifice their openness. The new forms of comedy and satire restricted the forms of *parrhesia* to the censure and mockery of social types in a broad spectrum of society, with a corollary object of treating prominent citizens as sacrosanct. Horace, moreover, transformed *parrhesia* into a value for the freedom of speech among intimate friends rather than the broader spectrum of citizens imagined to be brought together by amity in a Ciceronian republic.

At stake in this shrinking of social circles was a sense that the public censure of political and moral abuse counted as one of the powerful threads knitting together a whole community and polity. There was a comparable sacrifice to be made by other genres, as Horace argues in his verse epistle on poetry, addressed to his friend Pisos.[7] Verisimilitude and unities of time and place in drama, to take a prime example, are prized terms in the modern aesthetic described by the *Ars Poetica*. Both terms focus on the limits of poetic imagination and expressive liberties. To his lasting credit, Horace addresses his epistle to a friend who wholeheartedly disagrees with him. "Poets and painters," Pisos replies, "have always had the right to dare

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whatever representations they choose," uttering one of the most frequently translated lines of the entire poem in the Renaissance.

The great challenger to Horace's restriction of *parrhesia* and poetic license came not from Pisos but from Juvenal, the late imperial satirist, who reinvented satire so that it held nothing back. He railed against the times so fiercely that he chose enemies, not friends, as his ideal readers. From the perspective of Renaissance poets and commentators, Juvenal won the wrestling match with Horace over the full meaning of *parrhesia*. Julius Caesar Scaliger remarks that, whereas Horace laughs, "Juvenal burns, he threatens openly, he goes for the throat" (*Iuvenalis ardet, instat aperte, iugulat*).[8] Put another way, Juvenal wrested the genre of satire from the privileged space of Ciceronian *amicitia* that Horace hoped would endure even in the empire and thus sustain the idea that all societies are held together by friendship. He simultaneously loosened the restraints imposed on satire by empire. Juvenal's satire was fully modern, even as it harked back to the virtues of the republic. His satire responds to *parrhesia* as an ancient virtue that has been altered, eroded, and deformed in Rome under the Caesars. The differences among the satirical genres of Juvenal, Horace, and ancient Athens take the measure of how the philosophical virtue of frank speech, which is in theory a fixed thing, changes in relationship to historical contingencies. Juvenal's satires, even those that are intentionally disfigured and distended, are the swan's song to the liberty of speech as the hallmark virtue of a republic.[9] In an intensifying irony, the poets' experiences of duress and hopelessness in the late empire make the virtue of *parrhesia* more positive even as it became more fierce.

The very concept of "poetic license" has long been associated with the limiting factors placed on formal representation in the early days of the Roman empire.[10] Horace clearly spells out this idea of poetic license in his verse epistle on the decorums of poetry, in which he poses first as an advocate of voluntary self-censorship for the sake of conjoined aesthetic and political values and then as a schoolmaster of poetic norms. This fact is unfortunate, since it represents Horace as a poet who aimed to prescribe the norms of poetry through all time and not, as he was, a poet who hoped to preserve the republican values for free speech in an imperial environment that could easily grow inhospitable to it. The theme of his *Ars Poetica* is the status of *licentia* in a world whose modernity is pitted against ancient and revered freedoms of imagination and expression.

Poets of later imperial Rome continued to dare whatever representations they chose, even when doing so meant placing an implicit but steady pressure on the idea that the law is whatever the prince, who is *solutus*

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legibus (freed from law), wants it to be. When Ovid concludes his greatest poem, the *Metamorphoses*, he envisions the final struggle between all poetry and the relentless threats to its material survival – namely, the wrath of Jove, sword, fire, and time – and asserts that his own "better part" will survive so long as the many peoples of the world touched by the Roman empire read his poem and infuse it with their own breath, experience, and perspectives. In Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of the closing lines, Ovid asserts a vision of poetic transcendence fully dependent on the will and investment of readers across time and space:

> Now haue I brought a woork to end which neither Ioues feerce wrath,
> Nor swoord, nor fyre, nor freating age with all the force it hath
> Are able too abolishe quyght. Let comme that fatall howre
> Which (sauing of his brittle flesh) hath ouer me no powre,
> And at his pleasure make an end of myne uncertayne tyme:
> Yit shall the better part of mee assured bee to clyme
> Aloft above the starry skye. And all the world shall never
> Be able for too quench my name. For looke how farre so ever
> The Romane Empyre by the ryght of conquest shall extend,
> So farre shall all folke reade this work. And tyme without all end
> (If Poets as by prophesie about the truth may ame)
> My lyfe shall euerlastingly bee lengthened still by fame.

Ovid will live so long as the breath of diverse readers – each breath of whom contains the divine spark of creativity – animates his words. In the commentaries on his works compiled in the postclassical and Renaissance periods, Ovid's "better part" was defined as his ingenuity and eloquence.[11] His ability to pry poetic forms from the controlling principles of Augustan decorum is a talent that counts so long as readers across geopolitical space and time put their breath and ingenuity into the projects of reading, interpreting, and adapting both the poem and the imperial arts of Rome. What matters in the end is the ability of readers, present and future, to look to the past not for the weight of sedimentation and traditionalism but for the energy of its liberating, unchained forms.

This conception of poetry as a mode of engagement with the liberty of speech involves at least two corollaries. One is that invention, itself a process of discovering poetic forms and adapting them to new uses, is fundamentally bound up with the parrhesiastic tradition of political philosophy and the license of poetry to break rules. The second is that poetic allusion, without which poetry cannot invent, plays an instrumental role in the political life of poetry. To say so runs counter to prominent and generally accepted concepts of poetic allusion in modern criticism. Topical allusion, apparently anchored

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More Information

in the here and now of writing (actually the recent there and then) has long held sway in critical discussions about how to identify the political force of poetry, broadly understood as all forms of fiction. Topical allusion has long been viewed as the serious, hardworking twin of its feckless, arty sibling, the poetic allusion, which disregards historical boundaries and opens itself up to the ingenuity – or, less happily, the free association – of readers. Topical allusions can take risks and be brave. So can poetic ones.

From the rise of lyric eroticism in the late sixteenth century to the rise of libertinism in the later seventeenth century, English poetry enacts a mode of engagement with politics and political philosophy that departs from topicality as the privileged marker of historical and political significance. The model of poetry explored in this book counters the idea, made popular with the rise of the New Historicism, that fiction is dependent on topical allusions to ground it in such highlighted historical events as the Essex uprising, the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, or the Gunpowder Plot. This model of poetry also opposes the alignment of poetry with the ruling passions of empire, absolutist monarchy, and the Crown. This book argues that a great deal of poetry associated with the Renaissance takes deliberative liberties with decorous and often authoritarian forms of speech and, consequently, creates a new space for thinking about the liberty of speech in the domain of fiction.[12] The social and political energies of poetry flourish in the present time of their composition even as they aim for what J. K. Barret describes as untold futures, the open-ended goal of "artistic generativity and experimentation particularly focused on uncertainty, flexibility, and possibility."[13] This book explores how *parrhesia* and *licentia* participate in the proliferating forms and extensive temporality of poetry, which cannot fully anticipate when it may effect the changes in the world for which it strives.

Ovid

This is also a book about Ovid, the boldest poet of Augustan Rome, whose verse pervaded the poetry, culture, and political thought of Renaissance England with unprecedented variety and force. Ovid's importance to Renaissance poetry and arts has never been in question. Recent work has made it clear that his poetic example permeated the educational curriculum, models of rhetoric, concepts of gender and sexuality, and theories of the material world even before it made its full impact on poetry and poetic forms. It is hard to think of a classical writer who wields more influence than Ovid over the habits of thought, innovations in thinking, and changes of mind that characterize the Renaissance, both English and Continental.

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More Information

When Maureen Quilligan reviewed the criticism for the 2003 *Studies in English Literature*, she declared the advent of "the Ovidian Renaissance."[14] The outpouring of criticism on Ovid has continued robustly ever since, prompting the reflection that Raphael Regius (1450–1520), one of Ovid's early Renaissance editors and commentators, was genuinely trying to think through the poet's enormous influence in his own era when he wrote that the *Metamorphoses* "seems to me (to say it once) the pattern of all human and civil life" *(exemplar mihi ut semel dicam totius humanae & ciuilis uitae esse uidetur)*.[15] Through compendious notes, Regius revealed how the poem gathers together ancient sources on geography, astronomy, music, rhetoric, and both moral and natural philosophy. Like later editors – including Georg Schuler (1508–60), Jacob Moltzer (1503–58), and Jacobus Pontanus (1542–1626) – he defined the content of Ovid's poem as a universe of knowledge and a tapestry interweaving an inexhaustible range of authorities. As the inaugural woodcut of one sixteenth-century edition presents the poet, he used every instrument of knowledge at his disposal to imagine and record the world and especially its cosmologies, values, and norms, but he did so from outside the prescriptive influence of the city (see Figure 0.1).

Figure 0.1 Ovid, surrounded by instruments of knowledge, sits outside the city walls and reflects on how rightly to present cosmic order. Trinity College, Dublin.

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More Information

Ovid's great contribution to political thought in the English Renaissance was his conception of poetry as a site in which *parrhesia* could persist even within the limiting structures of empire and, what is more, insist on the liberties of citizen-subjects. The hallmarks of Ovid's poetry were his unrestrained wit (*ingenium*), friskiness (*lasciuia*), and license (*licentia*), as his ancient critics put it when they tried to sum up the rhetorical, erotic, and social freedoms he conferred upon his muse.[16] Ovid's poetic projects grew in ambition even as the emperor Augustus was souring on his former tolerance for *licentia* as a mutual benefit to citizens and the prince. The parrhesiast could speak a caustic truth, and the prince's tolerance was the counterproof of his own essential virtue. One English writer, who found himself on the bad side of James VI and I, invoked the model of Julius Caesar, who memorably held no resentments against poetic truth-tellers. It is certainly the case, as Ovid emphasizes in *Tristia* 2, that Julius Caesar held no grudge against the poet Catullus, who wrote an especially lively invective about Caesar's willingness to give whole patrimonies to one Mamurra in exchange for sexual favors.[17] John Colville quoted from Ovid's *Tristia* to the effect that "the greater the man, the more his wrath can be appeased," and then cited the "great Monarch Iulius Caesar," who "could forget nothing *but* injuries" (italics added).[18]

Although Ovid did not address historical abuses with the openness of Catullus, he seemed to feel that the right to document contemporary abuses and name names was an easy price to pay for a changed or metamorphosed form of license. His method was to untether political poetry from the here and now of praise and blame, which he treated as both risky and insufficiently ambitious. He divided *parrhesia* into its constituent parts, the bold and the open, then discarded the second part and radically amplified the first. Ovid thus sidestepped a great deal of the negotiation of praise and blame that goes into writing a poem that takes a single historical figure as its implied addressee and recipient of polite, deferential counsel. He omitted the openness of *parrhesia* and, at the same time, effectively buried the figure of Augustus beneath his own astonishing performances of wit. Part of his genius was to take great liberties with the very myths that Augustus used to uphold his divine iconography and support his efforts to revive the Roman religion. Ovid jettisoned the historical referent and tended to the myths, in which subjects are turned into many objects – star, stone, animal, tree, or flower – by absolute

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More Information

powers who repeatedly visit one special punishment and torture on their victims: that of silence.

Ovid demonstrates time and again that his metamorphosed subjects find within his poem voices that never cease to speak, both in complaints and innovation. The stories he weaves into his eternal song or *carmen perpetuum* celebrate the voices of the victims of and dissidents to arbitrary rule. The *Metamorphoses* treats the contests between mortals and gods with such skill that the poem has seemed to historical readers to exhibit divine artistry or, put differently, an artistry that reveals the divinity in human makings. Ovid's poems in all his genres are stunningly bold. But they are not fully "open." The openness of Ovid's poetry is that of a book or scroll, which lies "open" (*aperte*, or openly), to a page or passage, not the openness of a person entitled to speak openly, or *palam*, in the forum. Yet both forms of bold speech have a fundamental commitment to the open truth in words. For a truth to appear openly *aperte*, even as it is supposedly concealed in myth and allegory, means that readers are allowed to search out, discover, and contribute to its meanings and, in this way, participate in the creation of a commonwealth of letters. It is related to the concept of "emphasis" in ancient rhetoric, in which, as Frederick Ahl demonstrates, the speaker drops a hint into the text and then vacates the scene, allowing others to find the meaning.[19]

Ovid was the first Roman poet to inherit an empire. Vergil, Horace, Tibullus, and Propertius lived through the collapse of the republic, the civil war, the triumvirate rule, and the proscriptions of Roman citizens. After harrowing personal and collective experiences, they had the opportunity to choose whether or not to put their own voices into poems that would likely be taken as praise and support for the empire, regardless of how they managed their words, including cautions and criticism. Ovid had no such opportunity to choose and even less of an appetite for delivering the ancient freedoms of poetry into the hands of the prince. Since he came of age in the empire, it fell to him to ask what happens to poetry, poets, and readers, when a change of constitution grants one man, the prince or supposed first among citizens, authority over the meaning of speech and written words.

What happens to *parrhesia*, the hallmark virtue of republicanism, after the total collapse of the constitutional form that holds it dear? Ovid chose to reinvent it first in the genre of erotic elegy, and he never released his hold on the genre. He chose one of the slenderest, most playful forms of poetry, and he dished it out in the *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* and then in the *Fasti* and the elegiacally infused epic

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Metamorphoses. He returned to elegy in his exile. Throughout his life, Ovid levied the force of his own verse against political absolutism. What he implicitly declared (paradox intended) is that *parrhesia* does not die, even when the poetic word, like every other word, is subject to the prince's judgment. It splits in two, discarding its topical referents and doubling its bold freedoms. The very concept of poetic license changed in the hands of Ovid and his adaptors. It's not about respecting the rules. It's about breaking and changing them with ingenuity, élan, and *sprezzatura*.

These are the main reasons that readers, commentators, artists, and poets have seen Ovid as an exemplar not of vice but of virtue. He took up the work of his predecessors in Rome and extended it radically. As John Lane wrote in *Tom Tell-Trothes Message, and His Pens Complaint* (1600), a satire on the prostitution of learning in English universities:

> *Horace* did write the Art of Poetrie,
> The Art of Poetrie *Virgill* commended:
> *Ouid* thereto his studies did applie,
> Whose life and death still Poetrie defended.

Horace and Vergil respectively described and praised the virtues of poetry, as Lane puts it. But only Ovid lived and died for them. Joseph Martyn expressed a similar thought in a 1621 epigram titled "An euill Age":[20]

> Virgill, of Mars, and ruthfull warres did treate,
> Ouid, of Venus loue, and peace did write,
> Yet Virgill for his straine was compted great,
> And Ouid for his Loue, was banisht quite,
> No maruell then, if curtesie growe colde,
> When Hate is prais'd, and Loue it selfe contrould.

Ovid, who described his own verse in terms of sport, games, and jokes, played what Michel Foucault called the parrhesiast's game of life or death and lost, thus becoming a Phaethon-like martyr for the moral aspirations in which he believed.

The qualities of Ovid's poetry that have long been held suspect were also the makeup of his moral virtue. Ovid met with censure even in his earliest reviews, as the elder Seneca, Aemilius Scaurus, and Quintilian attest. In the English Renaissance, the yea-sayers to the ancient criticisms of Ovid's lack of boundaries came mainly but not exclusively from zealous Protestants, many of whom felt torn by their own attraction to the poet. Ovid's wit, friskiness, and

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unbounded play with rules and norms were both admirable and terrible. The criticisms of Ovid are so well documented in prior studies that repetition here is pointless.[21] What remains to be demonstrated is the absolute conviction that many readers and writers of the Renaissance had in the honesty, integrity, and parrhesiastic virtue of the poet who went "too far" in speech for his own safety. In fact, Ovid was more widely if less loudly known for his moral virtue than for his supposed vice during the Renaissance. A good deal of the historical, archival evidence for this claim is presented in the following chapters. (See especially Chapter 5, on Ben Jonson, who offered vigorous defenses of Ovid and poetic license in terms of historical opinion and records.)

Many Renaissance critics defended Ovid. In his 1561 *Poetices*, Julius Caesar Scaliger wrote: "Now we come to the place where greatness of wit and sharpness of judgment must be practiced. For who can learn enough to speak adequately about Ovid, much less to dare reprove him?"[22] To defend the poet was to do more than praise him. It was easy to admire Ovid's "aptnes by nature" and "wonderfull wit," as Thomas Wilson wrote, or to marvel at "sweet-lipt Ouid" and "wanton Ouid, whose inticing rimes / Haue with attractiue wonder forc't attention," as Francis Beaumont put it.[23] For Thomas Proctor, Ovid was "the Poets Prince, whose wits all others past," while George Hakewell reflected that even "Grecce had not a Poeme so abounding with delight & beauty, as Ovids Metamorphosis."[24] Sir Thomas Smith admired "quick-spirited, cleare-sighted Ouid," while Angel Day acknowledged that every one of "the Transformed shapes of Ouid" was possessed of a "forcible vtteraunce" that "breedeth as great delight as astonishment vnto the curious searcher of the same."[25] Ovid's skill was undeniable.

Other comments on the poet shaded toward grief over his eventual fate, when the poet was sent to Tomis on the Black Sea on the order of Augustus Caesar. Proctor invited his own readers to take his verses to heart, since they were composed "With no lesse payne then Ouid did, whose greefe by Muses grew."[26] William Kempe remarked that "Ouids learning, like Orpheus musicke, perswaded euen the Getes, a wilde and barbarous people, to vse great humanitie towards him while he liued, and afterwards to burie him with great pompe."[27] Wentworth Smith, for his part, commented that "Poesie is a diuine gifte," and "Ouid found this inclination in himselfe, and that was the reason hee saide, *Quicquid conabor dicere versus erit*; where Nature speakes so forceablie in any, there is no suppressing it."[28] To praise

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