

Silence in Freemasonry

W. Bro. Shawn Eyer

Cease Clamour and Faction, oh cease,
Fly hence all ye cynical train;
Disturb not, disturb not the lodge's sweet peace,
Where Silence and Secrecy reign.

Masonic Hymn, 1781

THE PROFOUND SILENCE of a tiled Lodge during ceremonies such as the initiation of a candidate can be deeply impressive, and naturally induces solemn reflections upon the essential meaning of the work. The Masonic philosopher W.L. Wilmshurst held that an ideal Lodge, when properly tiled and duly opened,

would be a **sanctuary of silence and contemplation**, broken only by ceremonial utterances or such words of competent and luminous instruction as the Master or Past Masters are moved to extend. And the higher the degree in which it is opened, the deeper and more solemn would be the sense of excluding all temporal thoughts and interests and of approaching more nearly that veiled central Light whose opening into activity in our hearts we profess to be our predominant wish. In such circumstances each Lodge meeting would become an occasion of profound spiritual experience. No member would wish to disturb the harmony of such a Lodge by talk or alien thought. (**The Masonic Initiation**, 1924)

A Silence Divine



Silence
Augustus Saint-Gaudens,
1874
G.·L.·. of New York
(At the main staircase in the
Grand Temple from 1876, then
removed to the Masonic
Hospital in Utica in 1923)

Freemasonry has traditionally personified this important characteristic of a properly opened Lodge. In one early example, John Bancks' **Ode to Masonry**(1738), the invocation is striking: "Come... Silence, Guardian of the Door! ... Be present still where Masons meet!" The allegorical

figure of Silence was frequently referenced in the forms of the ancient gods Harpocrates and Angerona, both of whom are typically shown holding a finger to their lips.

Angerona was especially popular. She was a deity in the Roman pantheon, considered the goddess of secrecy. She was also known as Diva Angerona and Ancharia, and may have been identical with Voluptas, the goddess of pleasure. Her most important duty was the maintenance of perfect secrecy. December 21 marked the Divalia or Angeronalia, her annual festival, which was held in the temple of Voluptas. The priests gathered there to offer sacrifices before her statue. This image depicted Angerona with her finger held up over her mouth, which was itself bound and sealed. Pliny the Elder (23–79 ce) says that this ceremony 'bears especial reference to the inculcation of silence on religious matters.' (*Naturalis Historia* 3.9) One of the secrets thus guarded was nothing less than the secret or mystical name of Rome, 'long kept buried in secrecy with the strictest fidelity and in respectful and salutary silence,' (Pliny, *ibid.*) the divulgence of which would imperil the city. Her name means "she who raises up," and this may refer to the finger raised to her lips, her role of guarding the city, or her connection to the rebirth of the sun—or any combination of the three.

Angerona is perhaps first mentioned Masonically in 1756 by Lawrence Dermott in his **Ahiman Rezon**:

The **Romans** had a Goddess of Silence named **Angerona**, which was pictured like **Harpocrates**, holding her Finger on her Mouth, in Token of Secrecy. (p. 7).

An early Masonic image of Angerona is plainly visible on the [frontispiece of the Free Mason's Calendar and Almanac of 1775](#).

Both the 1805 first American Edition of Dermott's **Ahiman Rezon** and James Hardie's **Monitor** (New York, 1819) add an account of Angerona and Harpocrates that concludes, "Hence the Latin sentence *linguam digito compesce*, check your tongue by your finger." [The actual classical phrase was *digito compesce labellum*, Juvenal, **Satires** 1.160)—Ed.]

Lodges named for Angerona have existed in Arkansas, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee; Eastern Star chapters have also been named after her. Mackey's **Encyclopedia** reports that "her statue has sometimes been introduced among the ornaments of Masonic edifices." Corroborating this, we know that prominent sculptures of Angerona were commissioned for several important Masonic temples, including the Grand Lodges of Pennsylvania (Z.A. Davis, **Monitor**, 1843, p. 126) and New York (Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1874), and the Scottish Rite Temple of Guthrie, Oklahoma.

The ancient "sign of Harpocrates" has sometimes been used as a Masonic gesture—sometimes even at public ceremonies. For example, at the April 16, 1841 cornerstone-laying of a new Masonic hall for the Brethren of the city of Lincoln in England, we see the interesting nonverbal lesson enacted before some two hundred guests, principally ladies:

[...T]he Architect... produced the plans for the inspection of the Prov. Grand Master. The D.P.G.M. turning to the Master of the Lodge, said, "Worshipful Master, what will your Lodge be like?" To this no answer was given, but the W. Master pointed up to the heavens, then down to

the earth, and then extended his hands horizontally, pointing outwards. The D.P.G.M. then said, "That is a good plan, W.M., but what more have you to tell me?" No answer was made, but the Master first placed his right hand upon his heart, and afterwards his left to his lips. The D.P.G.M. said, "The Master does well, Brothers; let us copy his example," on which each member gave the same signal of sincerity and silence. (**Freemason's Monthly Magazine**, Charles Whitlock Moore, Ed., vol. 1, 1842, p. 85)

Silence and Circumspection

Just as the ideal of Masonic silence can be personified in the allegorical figures of Harpocrates and Angerona, so it is intended to be realized in the life of every initiate. It is no mere abstract, but is intended to be an essential part of our **applied Masonry**—practiced even when we are not in Lodge. Indeed, William Preston taught that silence is "the Mason's chief virtue," And the **Monitor** instructs us that:

The Book of Constitutions, Guarded by the Tyler's Sword, reminds us that we should be ever watchful and guarded in our thoughts, words and actions, particularly when before the uninitiated; ever bearing in remembrance those truly Masonic virtues, **silence** and **circumspection**.



First Seal of the Antient Grand
Lodge
1751

Such virtues are internal traits, most effectively cultivated through careful self-reflection. The annual Installation Ritual makes it explicit that the Tiler's sword is something that, in a way, we **all** carry: "As the sword is placed in the hands of the Tiler, to enable him effectually to guard against the approach of cowans and eaves-droppers, and permit none to pass except those

who are duly qualified, so it should admonish us to set a guard over our thoughts, a watch at our lips, post a sentinel over our actions; thereby preventing the approach of every unworthy thought and deed, thus preserving consciences void of offense toward God and man." In other words, the Tiler's sword should be used to fend off the cowans in our minds: those ideas not fit for entry into the Temple of our lives. This deeply interior perspective reinforces the powerful role that contemplation and self-reflection possess in the overall moral constitution of a Mason.

Vide, Aude, Tace

One of the old Latin mottos of the Order is Vide, Aude, Tace— three verbs in the imperative or "command" tense. Vide in Latin means "see" in both the literal and figurative senses, and thus is connected to our words "visual" and "wit". The first refers only to the fact of seeing or not seeing something with our eyes. But the metaphorical meaning is what we mean when we exclaim, "Ah, I see!" We saw with our eyes, but later we actually understood. Similarly, we say "it finally dawned on me."



Master Mason's ring featuring
a Vide Aude Tace motif
Bro. Andrew Horn, 2003

Aude means "dare," and is the root of our word "audacity." A Mason must dare to apply to the Craft of his own free will and accord, and after he is initiated, it is his responsibility to embody such fortitude that he will be able to put the lessons of Freemasonry into practice. Aude follows Vide because there is benefit neither from uninformed daring nor from understanding without practical application.

Tace means "be silent," and is related to our words "tacit" and "taciturn." The command to remain silent may allude the theme of Masonic silence in all of its dimensions. from the obligation that binds a Mason to his Craft, to the 1723 regulation requiring him to be "a lover of quiet," to the duty of every Mason to maintain in trust the secrets of his brethren, and even to the preservation of esoteric wisdom from the abuses of the profane.

All together, the motto literally means "See (or Understand), Dare, Be Silent," and its essence is best expressed as "Understand It, Boldly Practice It, Remain Silent about It."—truly a fitting summary of the most important things required of a Masonic initiate.

"Finally, silence, silence, silence, should be the first, second and third degrees of every man's Masonry."

M.:W.: Bro.: Abraham T. Metcalf
Grand Master of Masons in Michigan
1871