

Some expressions can have surprisingly literal origins. A forgettable Elizabethan playwright, John Dennis, by the waving of a metal sheet invented the "stage thunder" still used today. The play for which this simple but ingenious device was first applied ran only three days. However, when a short time later he heard his own invention used effectively in a rival playwright's production (*Macbeth*), from his seat he cried out:

"Damn! See how the rascals use me! They will not let my play run, and yet *they steal my thunder!*" John Dennis (1657-1734) (quote discovered accidentally in *Bartlett's*)

Compassion for the Purity of Secondary Phenomena

A Comedy

I

lighting and thunder –
a link between levels

Tending the daily fueling of illusions,
he tamps the damp and smoldering words in place
that only in their strokes do they resemble

those shafts of light, whose forking brilliance blurs
the penetrating points of their precision,
shuddering forth from cauldrons so intense

they stunningly annihilate the moment
of our vast and miniature concerns –
their cloudy trails like cosmic after-words

boom through their chambers like colossal epigrams,
drumming our worldly ears. Even if our own
characters, arched from graceful strokes,

could form the engines to convey our cargo
through the subtlest interstices, to thus
illuminate our versions of the moment,

clamoring oceans would rush to fill the gap
like passions hoarding all our inner space,
lest some deep, sacred secret cracking open

renders heartless all our sound illusions.

II

the ecstasy of
discovery

After his diurnal inky mutterings
talking his insects over nibbled pages
with under-impressive crumbs of eagerness

plugging his outer ears with characters
the mock creator enters, now, a world
at once more clear, more dark, more strangely reboant,

(*cont'd*)

where wobbling sheets become voluminous –
O volumes of sound ! their cool diapasons !
let the crescendos ring, while shattering

these raveling edges of deception
their wavey sheets crashing in shimmering silence.
Unexpectedly he makes a pact

with vigorous midnight's trembling echo.

III

the higher
powers
alerted

Though one who brings these cosmic corollaries
in false persona, still must answer higher.
He knows the wild innocence he imitates

that none should claim – like thunder shaking down
its slow, conservative responses to
the major powers (rocketing to freedom).

What punishment for him who dares to mold
the flexible deceptions of mere metal,
attempting to tame the unattainable?

Let him be *unknown* who dares to convey
from heaven's momentous mouth, this huge phenomenon –
for thunder's unassigned to mortal beings

raining down its drawn-out passion, hushing up
loftier battles vaguely out of reach,
woolly and pleasant now in dim resounding,

only a cozy gruffness rumbles backward.
The real thunder's above and over us
and cannot hold inside its seamless compass

any theater of trivial revenge.
The ultimate jest will do: no one can steal
what's given out to all, as if one could

make off somewhere secret with the wind
or offer up a copyright on passion
or parcel freedom out to those who sign

or peddle bolts of lightning to awake the mind.