

TAMING SHREWS: PERFORMATIVE SPEECH BEFORE AND AFTER THE ACT
OF 1606

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I

In 1660, Margaret Hughes became the first woman to legally perform on the English stage. Before her ascent it was illegal for women to be actors, and consequently men played all women's roles. This transvestite theater, however, was hardly less controversial than female involvement in the theatre and has been the subject of much contemporary and modern debate. Stephen Greenblatt claims that based on the one-sex model that was prevalent at the time, which held that women were imperfectly formed or incomplete men, a transvestite theater was perfectly natural. Many contemporary writers, however, termed it unnatural, and stressed how clothing in particular marked gender difference and hence male superiority.¹ While many polemicists argued that a male playing a female endangered his own masculinity and subjected himself to effeminacy, popular opinion held that the alternative, a woman onstage, was far less desirable. Women, particularly because of their liminal or unstable nature, were treated with suspicion, and consequently much work was done to police gender boundaries and to limit women's potential power.² One of the primary ways in which early modern men tried to limit women's power was by curbing their language, and thus controlling their tongues and consequently, it was believed, their bodies. While language at this time was seen as not just a means to describe the world but as a *force* acting in the world and thus as a means to act in the world—what is termed performative—women's language was thought to be especially potent, if only because women were held to be more unregulated

¹ Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988; pg. 88.

² Ideas from Fletcher, Anthony. *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

and passionate in character and thus in their speech.³ Not allowing women onstage, then, was in part a means of controlling women's performative speech, and therefore expressed a fear of it. However, while women were not allowed onstage, the issues of women's performative speech and performative speech in general were popular and often depicted debates.

In 1594 the conspicuously titled *Taming of a Shrew*, was first performed on the London stage. This play has much in common with the later and more popular *Taming of the Shrew*, in particular its fascination with women's language and woman taming.⁴ Where *The Shrew* is ambivalent about the success of Kate's taming, *A Shrew* presents an even more strident challenge to this concept. This challenge is displayed most effectively by Kate's aside, by the end of the play, specifically Kate's speech to the other wives, and Christopher's Sly's comments at the close of the play. Unlike in *The Shrew* in *A Shrew* Kate makes an independent decision to marry Ferando/Petruchio, a decision that she relates to the audience in her only aside: "But yet I will consent and marrie him/ For I methinks have livide too long a maid./ And match him, to, or else his manhood's good."⁵ Kate tells the audience that she will play along with her tamer—both her actions and language, then, become performative in the most pure sense. Consequently, Kate's final speech, while it upholds obedience, may be just another act, another form of performative speech. Either way, In *A Shrew*, Kate's speech entreats the women to obey their husbands because their husbands need *their* assistance, not because the women need their authoritative husbands to take care of them. Women are not helpless, but active players in

³ Overall conclusions from Fletcher.

⁴ *The Shrew* appeared in quarto version after its publication in the 1623 Folio Edition, while *A Shrew* was not reprinted.

⁵ *Taming of A Shrew*. Maryland: Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, 1992; pg.53.

the marital relationship. Furthermore, Kate's speech does not limit the sphere of women's action to domestic duties as it does in *The Shrew* and, perhaps most importantly, it does not silence the women as it does in *The Shrew*. Kate's performative speech is successful in that it looks like the result of her taming, yet it's merely an elaborate act. Furthermore, women's tongues are not tamed by Kate's speech, as Emelia (the Bianca character) makes it obvious she finds Kate's speech ridiculous and claims if she remains a shrew it is better than being a sheep: Emelia: How now Polidor, in a dump, what sayst thou man?/ Polidor: I say thou art a shrew./ Emelia: That's better then a sheepe."⁶ Consequently, the whole notion of women taming is challenged, as well as the idea that Kate's speech has power beyond the ability to deceive Petruchio as to its candor.

The Frame Tale that begins but does not end in *The Shrew* is concluded in *A Shrew* as Christopher Sly awakens from his drunken stupor in which he has been duped into believing himself a Lord and entertained in that guise with the taming plot. Upon awakening, he exclaims:

I know now how to tame a Shrew
I dreamt upon it all this night till now
And thou hast wakt me out of the best dreame
That ever I had in my life. But Ile to my
Wife presently, and tame her too⁷

While Sly may wish his words to be performative—to compel action—the chance of their enacting what they say is slim. This is displayed by the humorous image of the unkempt and drunken Sly wobbling home to tame his wife. The unlikelihood of this occurring throws into doubt the likelihood of the entire taming plot. Here, as Leah Marcus explains

⁶ *Taming of A Shrew*, 88.

⁷ *Taming of A Shrew*, 89.

in *Unediting the Renaissance*, “the reality of the taming plot...is severely undercut, it has remained ‘only’ a play—or even a dream throughout.”⁸ The reality of the taming plot is weakened as Sly attributes it to a dream and thus relegates the idea of successfully controlling women, primarily their bodies and language, to the realm of male fantasy. In doing so, Sly also relegates the power of women’s language to the realm of fantasy, or in this case, nightmare. Thus, he undercuts the very power of performative speech—the performative speech of the play has convinced Sly of the reality of woman taming, even while his own situation and Kate’s actions undermine this idea. So, the end of *A Shrew*, while it makes gestures towards controlling speech, simultaneously undercuts and challenges this ideal.

What is now most often referred to as the “good version” of the *Taming of the Shrew* (read uncorrupt and Shakespearean) came out in folio text in 1623. While today *A Shrew* is recognized as either source material for *The Shrew* or a corrupt version of it, at the time the texts were recognized, for copyright purposes at least, as the same play.⁹ Additionally, Marcus argues that there is reason to believe Shakespeare had a hand in both plays; only later editorial decisions distanced Shakespeare from the earlier text. She asserts, “*A Shrew* with its freer relationship between Petruchio/Ferando and Katherine, its many undercuttings of the shrew-taming moral, was increasingly perceived, in a subtly sexualized language of transgression, as a debased and brazen travesty of the manly Shakespeare version.”¹⁰

⁸ Marcus, Leah. *Unediting the Renaissance*. New York, London: Routledge, 1996; pg. 104.

⁹ Marcus, 105.

¹⁰ Marcus, 126.

Whether or not Shakespeare did indeed have a hand in both plays, *The Shrew* seems to be a response to *A Shrew*—an attempt to patch up the controversial parts, if only superficially. Thus, while general dating places *The Shrew* between 1590-96 I would argue that *The Shrew* was written, and more importantly first performed, much later, specifically after 1606 for reasons I will explain shortly. Thus, while the plays share much in common, they also have significant differences. Most notable are the different endings. In *The Shrew*, Kate's speech emphasizes how helpless women are without their husbands' authoritative guidance, and it is for this reason they must be obedient:

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee,
And for thy maintenance commits his body
To painful labour both by sea and land,
To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,
Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe,
And craves no other tribute at thy hands
But love, fair looks, and true obedience,
Too little payment for so great a debt.¹¹

Women must be obedient to ensure their own well-being. Here, women are entirely subservient and impotent. Furthermore, this speech ends with the other wives silenced—the play is concluded with Petruchio commending Kate's speech, and whisking her off to bed. No other female speaks. Kate's speech is performative in that it compels the action it urges, but whereas Kate's speech in *A Shrew* may be a true performance, Kate's speech in *The Shrew* may be merely a performance of Petruchio's will. Kate's speech is still performative, and ultimately effective, but it is far from the patriarchy-challenging performative speech she opens the play with in which she threatens any husband with

¹¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1992; V.ii.146-154.

verbal and physical abuse. Finally, the Frame Tale, which is set-up similarly to *A Shrew*, is not resolved. Leaving the Frame Tale hanging, not returning Sly to reality, invites the audience to forget that what they are seeing is only a play; it may instead resemble reality. The idea of taming a woman is not a fantasy but, perhaps, a reality. In the end, the *Taming of the Shrew* is certainly a more patriarchal and misogynist text than the earlier play. It is more concerned with both effectively controlling women's speech and bodies and ultimately expresses more anxiety over women's speech and bodies and the power that lies therein, specifically, perhaps, because of the effectiveness of Kate's multiple speeches both before and after her taming.

In 1647, a play by Fletcher entitled *The Women's Prize or The Tamer Tamed* appeared in folio print.¹² This play is an obvious response to *The Shrew* as it picks up with Petruchio after Kate has died and he has married a new wife, Maria. While this play appears to satirize the idea of woman taming—it is Maria who tames Petruchio—it is concerned with the same ideas concerning women's speech and bodies. Maria tames Petruchio by withholding her body from him while making him adhere to her words. She claims:

I am no more the gentle tame Maria;
Mistake me not; I have a new soule in me
Made of North-wind, nothing but a tempest;
And like a tempest shall it make all ruins,
Till I have run my will out¹³

¹² Though this 1647 Folio edition is the earliest extant edition we have of *The Tamer Tamed*, most critics date its completion nearer to 1611.

¹³ Fletcher, John. *The Woman's Prize or the Tamer Tamed*. Ed. George B. Ferguson. Netherlands: Mouton and Co., 1966; II. i. 71-74.

Maria will not stop until her words affect Petruchio's actions; that is, until her performative words take effect. Consequently, Petruchio imagines taming Maria's and other disobedient women's unruly tongues with bodily punishment, the infamous cucking stool: "We'll ship 'em out in cuck stools, there they'l saile/ As brave Columbus did, til they discover/ The Happy islands of obedience."¹⁴ Thus, while Maria's tongue, compared to Katherine's, is gentle and quiet (even though she claims she will speak tempests, her language itself is mild), there is still great fear of women's language. After hearing Maria's assertion that she will tame him, Petruchio asserts, "the devill's in 'em [women]." and when speaking of Maria, Pedro and Jacques exclaim:

Ped: Oh her tongue, her tongue
Jaq: Rather her many tongues.
Ped. Or rather strange tongues
Jaq: Her lying tongue
Ped. Her lisping tongue.
Jaq. Her loud tongue.
Ped. And her lickerish—
Jaq. Many other tongues and many strange tongues
That ever Babel had to tell his ruines,
Were women rais'd withall; but never a true one.¹⁵

By equating women's tongues with the tongues that destroyed Babel, Jacques grants women's language great, albeit dangerous, power. And yet Maria seems very reasonable at the end and promises, so long as Petruchio upholds his end of the bargain, that she is done with her tricks and "now am vowed your servant." Despite Maria's turn towards physical domesticity and unchallenging language, however, the overall attitude towards women's language has not changed much from *The Shrew* to *The Tamer Tamed*. In both

¹⁴ Fletcher; II. i.56-58. It should be noted that cuck-stools were commonly used to punish not just scolds and shrews but also witches whose sharp tongues were often the cause of their condemnation. It is notable that both Katherines and Maria are at some point equated with a witch or the devil.

¹⁵ Fletcher; V ii. 35-41.

texts, it is women's transgressive, patriarchy-challenging language that is most repellent to the men, and which they seek to control. Moreover, in seeking to control their language, they seek to control their actions. In *The Shrew*, Kate's use of language leads to her being labeled a witch, "the devil's dam," while in *The Tamer Tamed* Petruchio imagines punishing Maria for her linguistic and physical disobedience by making use of the cucking-stool, a device notoriously used to punish both shrews and witches, both of whom were often condemned for their sharp tongues and indecorous behavior. In both texts, then, it is women's transgressive language that is ultimately scary to men as it leads to transgressive actions, and to women being labeled as social termagants, if not worse. Consequently, it is women's challenging language that must be controlled, although the texts come to this in different ways—in *The Shrew* by breaking down Kate's resistance, in *The Tamer Tamed* by submitting to Maria's demands only in order to regain power over her. In *A Shrew*, by contrast, Kate's decision to willingly play along with the taming effort allows her to maintain a greater degree of agency as portrayed at the end by her performative speech that convinces Ferando/ Petruchio, even if it is not genuine.

What, however, could account for the change in attitude from *A Shrew* to *The Shrew*, especially if Shakespeare had a hand in both? While it would be easy to say that *The Shrew* is merely a critique of its uncouth precursor, I would like to argue that the change was due at least in part to something more formal. In 1606, an act was passed in Parliament that officially prohibited swearing and oaths onstage:

For in preventing and avoyding of the great abuse of the holy Name of God in Stage-playes, Interludes, Maygames, Shewes and such like, Bee it enacted by our Sovereigne Lord the Kings Majestie, and by the Lords Spirituall and Temporall and Commons in this present Parliament assembled, and by the Auhoritie of the same, that if at any time or times after the end of this present Session of Parliament, any person or persons doe or shall in any Stage-play, Interlude, Shew, Maygame or

Pageant, iestingly and prophanely speake or use the Name of God, or of Christ Iesus, or the holy Ghost or of the Trinitie, which are not to be spoken but with feare and reverence [he or they] Shall forfeit for every such offence by him or them committed tenne Pounds.¹⁶

While the Act is couched in terms of religious language, and the prohibition was against religious swearing in particular, the Act betrays a fear of forceful or performative speech in general, shown by its attempt to regulate speech acts on stage. At this time, the fear of theatrical language (as well as performance) was prevalent and there was agitation to shut down the theaters completely, as will be discussed. Religious cursing, then, is only the best example of such forceful language, but any kind of cursing, or even forceful language coming from the wrong type of person (for instance, a woman talking authoritatively), was viewed with suspicion. Consequently, plays were amended, not only for religious cursing, but also for their treatment of performative speech in general. As has been shown, women's performative language was often depicted and varyingly.

Perhaps the most famous example of a play being censored by the 1606 Act is Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In its original 1604 edition, Faustus' fate for conjuring and racking the name of God is left uncertain, as his body is never discovered, and many critics believe that up until the final moment the possibility of escape exists. In the later 1616 text, however, his damnation is certain, as his mangled body represents his fragmented faith and ultimate damnation.¹⁷ Interestingly, Faustus' bodily fragmentation is a direct sign that it was his cursing that was damning, as bodily fragmentation was regarded as the most likely punishment for taking the Lord's name in vain—the curser's

¹⁶ Taken from Gazzard, Hugh: "An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)" *Review of English Studies: The Leading Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, (61:251), 2010 Sept, 495-528.

¹⁷ These ideas are taken from Leah Marcus' chapter on *Doctor Faustus* in *Unediting the Renaissance*.

body reenacted the crucifixion where the Lord's body was similarly broken. Here, when Faustus racks the name of God, there are definite spiritual and material consequences for his prohibited words and actions. His performative speech, his cursing, is shown to be conclusively damning. Thus, the two texts are not so different in their staging of curses, as both texts present the curses in Latin, but are quite different in their treatment of the results of performative language. The idea that performative language had efficacy onstage is best portrayed by the often-cited occurrence of extra devils appearing onstage, as well as theatrical mishaps, like the theater cracking at the sound of the conjuring—in these cases, Faustus' conjuration literally draws forth supernatural effects and devils.¹⁸ Other texts, such as many later editions of Shakespeare's history plays, simply amended lines that included religiously inappropriate oaths or curses. Thus, in the second folio edition of *Henry IV*, oaths such as "by the masse," "by my troth," and "by the Lord" are replaced with phrases such as "looke, looke," "trust me" and "I sweare." Furthermore, the occurrences of the words God and Heaven drop considerably in Shakespearian texts written and performed after 1606.¹⁹

After 1606, performative language, especially when it presented a challenge to religious or patriarchal authority as does Faustus, Kate's or Maria's, was often amended or shown to be highly problematic, if not dangerous. Women's speech, in particular, was scrutinized for being threatening in these ways. This, I would argue, is what happened to *The Shrew*. Thus, while both of the Kates display speech that is forceful and challenging to authority, the Kate in *The Shrew*, the text dated after 1606, must be more thoroughly tamed, her speech controlled. Her speech to the women, though

¹⁸ Marcus, 42.

¹⁹ Jowett, John and Taylor, Gary. *Shakespeare Reshaped 1606-1623*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

still performative, must display and impel obedience. Moreover, in *A Tamer Tamed* the forceful, performative language is itself toned down. Thus, for example, while Maria speaks of being no longer gentle and filled with tempests, her original, troublesome words are not as biting or inappropriate as Katherine's, who claims:

I'faith, sir, you shall never need to fear:
I wis it is not half way to her heart;
But if it were, doubt not her care should be
To comb your noddle with a three-legg'd stool
And paint your face and use you like a fool.²⁰

Here Kate threatens, almost in the form of a curse, her hypothetical future husband with verbal and physical abuse, and the force of her words attests to their sincerity.

Despite amending Maria's language—her language is never as forceful and defiant as Kate's—*The Tamer Tamed* still highlights the fear of women's forceful language, as shown by the male character's reactions to Maria's actions and words. The texts, then, reflect the anxieties of the day: anxieties over not just the efficacy of speech in general, but over oaths, women's speech and theatrical speech in particular.

II

The Act of 1606 was a long time in coming. For decades Protestants in particular had railed against taking the name of God in vain. They claimed that to do so was perjury and therefore merged profanity with oath-breaking and forswearing.²¹ Protestants argued, as Edmond Bicknoll does in his treatise, "A Sword Against Swearying," that the building

²⁰ Shakespeare, (I.i.61-66).

²¹ Gazzard, Hugh: "An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)" *Review of English Studies: The Leading Journal of English Literature and the English Language*, (61:251), 2010 Sept, 495-528.

block of good religion, and thus good conscience, is to refrain from swearing— anti-swearing is the subject of one of the Ten Commandments and is cited in countless passages throughout the New Testament.²² Further, Bicknoll argued that taking an oath is equivalent to idolatry as it makes the thing one swears by as important as God. The only “good” way to swear is to take an oath of the Lord and then “vaynely thou shalt not swaere: but in truth, in judgement, in rithgeousness.” As one can expect, most swearers did not use oaths in the correct manner, but rather flung them about as if they had no consequences. According to Bicknoll, “common swearers truely beare no naturall loue to GOD, but teare him in peeces, shoote at his hart lyke bastardes, and crye with that Strumpet, deuide him, cut him in peeces.” By swearing on God’s body one crucifies God all over again. Swearing, then, is not just dangerous but the height of religious blasphemy. Consequently, swearing can bring religious consequences, such as the loss of the heavenly kingdom, down upon the swearer, if not the wider populace.

Another pressure point that led to the passing of the Act of 1606 was the general anxiety over the theater, an anxiety that would eventually lead to the theaters being closed in 1642. Theaters, situated as they were on the outskirts of London, were literally and metaphorically on the outskirts of society. Moreover, they were associated with less edifying forms of amusement and with outbreaks of the plague. As Janette Dillon argues, “Both the state and the city of London sought to limit theater’s potential to incite disorder in various ways: by forbidding Sunday and Lent playing; by restricting the hours of performance; by attempting to ban performance in particular places; and by setting up

²² Bicknoll, Edmond. “A Sword Against Swearing.” London, 1570. *Early English Books Online*.

systems for licensing of both plays and players.”²³ Moreover, maintaining the custom of keeping women off the stage may have helped to curb the fear of women’s language and empowerment, even as it created other problems with cross-dressing males.

Even with these limitations on plays, many anti-theatricalists, who also happened to be Protestants, were unhappy with the state of the theaters and their impact on society. Perhaps the most famous complaint came from Phillip Stubbes in his 1583 treatise, “An Anatomie of Abuses.”²⁴ Here, Stubbes argues that plays were “ordained by the Devil, and confederate to heathen Gods, to draw us from Christianity to idolatry.”²⁵ For Stubbes, watching a man pray to Venus, or performing the act of praying to Venus, was the same as actually doing so; similarly acting a Devil and being a Christian were incommensurable.²⁶ For Stubbes, then, the theater presented myriad ways in which men were led astray from the true path of Christianity; not the least that it drew people away from worship and filled their idle hours with images of blasphemy, lewdness, and violence, and filled their ears with irreverent curses and oaths. If plays displayed any form of vice, this vice could infiltrate into the audience and cause them to act upon it; at the least, it presented them with soul-damaging displays of evil. In this vein, then, any type of cursing onstage was dangerous, as Stubbes would have seen no difference between a theatrical and a real curse, and thus, regardless of intention, the curse

²³ Dillon, Janette. “Theatre and Controversy, 1603-1642.” In *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*. Eds. Jane Milling and Peter Thompson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

²⁴ It is crucial to note that Stubbes’ treatise also includes a section on swearing where he highlights, as Bicknoll does, the blasphemy of swearing—“Swearers crucify the Lord of life as fresh as the Apostle saith, as much as in their power, and are as guilty of his death, passion and bloodshedding as ever was Judas that betrayed him.” Moreover, where Bicknoll tries to leave room for a good oath, Stubbes contends that, “a true oath is dangerous, a false oath is damnable, and no oath is sure.”

²⁵ Stubbes, Phillip. “An Anatomie of Abuses.” London, 1583. *Early English Books Online*.

²⁶ Many Anti-theatricalists associated the theater with witchcraft, as both were considered heretical: both abuse Scripture and both often pray to different Gods (The Devil or, here, Jove).

threatened to perform its work and prove true.²⁷ Moreover, seeing how Stubbes viewed cursing as the height of blasphemy, the curse would bring down the wrath of God upon the heads of those involved, if not the nation itself.

Stubbes' treatise sparked a campaign of pamphlets written against the theater. In 1589, Stephen Gosson, a self-termed reformed playwright, published his contribution, "The Schoole of Abuse." Gosson's pamphlet is greatly indebted to Stubbes in that he argues that plays "wound the conscience" and draw men from "play to pleasure, from pleasure to slouth, from slouth too sleepe, from sleepe too sinne, from sinne to death, from death to the devil."²⁸ Gosson's pamphlet is interesting, as it is couched in classical allusions and language. Gosson draws a parallel between ancient Rome and Elizabethan England by arguing that both realms were or will be destroyed by decadence, and the theater is the epitome, or even the origin, of this decadence. For Gosson the theater presents a twofold danger: first it threatens to destroy men of good faith, and second it threatens to destroy the kingdom itself, perhaps even by its irreverent language and cursing. If the theaters could not be closed down, then strict regulation was necessary, and the best place to begin was with the ungodly language, the cursing that permeated their stages.

Just how stridently the Act of 1606 was adhered to is a question of much scholarly debate. Hugh Gazzard states that because there was no known trial for those who violated the Act before the turn of the 17th century, the Act was originally not taken seriously, while other scholars demonstrate how playwrights amended their writing styles

²⁷ Stubbes was not alone in his belief that curses or rituals onstage were efficacious. In many version of *Doctor Faustus*, the conjuring scene was believed to conjure real devils beyond those portrayed by the actors.

²⁸ Gosson, Stephen. "The Schoole of Abuse" England, 1589. *Early English Books Online*.

to fit the new rules. Both Frances Shirley and Geoffrey Hughes argue that Shakespeare in particular made use of pre-Christian or pagan worlds, or worlds in which the religious picture seems confused, in which to place his plays chronologically and geographically.²⁹ Before the Act of 1606 many of his plays were set in England or the surrounding areas in the present or near past, while after the Act they were set mostly in the ancient past and mostly in places like Rome or Celtic England. In doing this, Shakespeare could make use of oaths such as “By Jove” to much the same effect as the prohibited “By God,” etc. In *King Lear*, for example, God is used only once, and then only tentatively, while the characters often cry out to Jove and other pagan Gods for divine intervention. Moreover, Shakespeare’s use of the word “God” drops from an average of nearly 37 uses per play before the Act to less than one use per play after the Act.³⁰

Regardless of how closely playwrights adhered to the rules against religious swearing, however, Shirley is left musing whether this was ultimately to no purpose. She wonders whether merely cutting out the specific oaths to God matters, or whether it is not the linguistic power of the general oath or curse that performs the dangerous and prohibited dramatic and symbolic work.³¹ In this case, “By Jove” could be just as powerful as “By God,” even while it superficially conformed to the Act’s rules. Thus, while the Act of 1606 was aimed at controlling religious cursing onstage, it failed to control what was behind this specific anxiety, an anxiety over performative speech in general. Either way, however, I would argue that the Act changed the way in which plays performed and presented curses as well as women’s performative speech in particular.

²⁹ Shirley, Frances A. *Swearing and Perjury in Shakespeare’s Plays*. London; Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1979; pg. 126; Hughes, Geoffrey. *Swearing*. London: Penguin Books, 1998; pg.104.

³⁰ Jowett, John and Taylor, Gary, 57

³¹ Shirley, 152.

In describing performative speech I refer to J. L. Austin's famous set of lectures, *How to Do Things with Words* and Shoshana Felman's work *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* which succinctly outlines philosopher J.L. Austin's argument on speech acts and speech theory. According to Felman, a performative speech act is one "whose function is not to inform or to describe, but to carry out a performance, to accomplish an *act* through the very process of their enunciation."³² And Austin notes that performatives derive their name from "perform, the usual verb with the noun action: it indicates that the issuing of the utterances is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something."³³ The best example of such a speech act, according to both Austin and Felman, is the ritualistic phrase "I do" said at a wedding, for by saying those words one performs the act of marriage. While normal descriptive utterances (what Austin terms constatives) can be either true or false, Austin notes that performatives can be either felicitous or infelicitous. That is they can either perform what they intended to successfully, or something can go wrong. Thus, a performative speech act has the capacity to "miss its goal" or to fall short of its intended accomplishment—when this occurs it is termed a misfire.³⁴ But, as Felman, drawing on Austin, makes clear, a misfire does not refer to an absence where nothing is done, but to the enactment of a difference—"the act of failing thus opens up the space of referentiality—or of impossible reality—not because *something is missing* but because *something else is done*."³⁵ Thus, according to

³² Felman, Shoshana. *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin or Seduction in Two Languages*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003; pg. 5.

³³ Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955; pg. 6-7.

³⁴ Austin also speaks of "abuses" where the act *is* achieved but it ultimately only professed. Interestingly, Austin speaks of this occurring when an actor utters something on the stage, in a soliloquy, or in poetry (22). Thus, Austin does not grant theatrical or rhetorical language with the same power as what he considers true performatives. This view, of course, is in opposition to the early modern view of language.

³⁵ Felman, 57.

Austin, if you say “I do” at a wedding but are already married, you have not done nothing, though the marriage is void, you have instead committed the act of bigamy. Finally, Felman in particular stresses the connection between linguistic inscription and bodily acts. She claims, “the act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the *speaking body*, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the mental and the domain of the physical, breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, manner and language.”³⁶

Felman’s and J. L. Austin’s view of language, though articulated some hundreds of years later, explains much about early modern thought on language. As David Schallwyk argues, “the preeminence of rhetoric in the early modern period also shows how language was principally appreciated as a *force* working in the world rather than as an (always-already failed) reflection of it.”³⁷ For early moderns, language was not primarily a means to describe the world, but a means to act within it: words, conceived in the mind, could have real material effects on the body and in the world. Furthermore, the connection between bodies and words was a prevalent ideal, as has already been highlighted in this paper by the dual anxieties over female bodies and tongues as expressed in all three versions of the shrew stories. In his book, Shallwyk focuses on Shakespeare’s sonnets, claiming that they are mobilized not merely to say that things are so, but instead to transform a situation. Thus, they are a form of social action: the actor-poet trying to transform his relationship with his patron, rather than merely praising his patron.

³⁶ Felman, 65.

³⁷ Schallwyk, David. *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Plays*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002; pg. 10.

The power of rhetoric was conceived most dramatically and most often in the rhetoricians' myth, in which the orator brings his previously uncivilized and savage people to civilization and law by means of his eloquence. In this sense, the orator is king or imperialist and his auditors his subjects.³⁸ Rhetoric, then, was a means of compelling action, and based on the above story, it compelled beneficial actions. As the Florentine humanist Coluccio Salutati states, "For how can one dominate more than by means of the emotions, bend the listener where you might wish and lead him off with grace and desire where you would move him? Unless I am deceived this is the force of eloquence."³⁹ While Salutati's description of rhetoric is meant to be a positive one, it also betrays the dangers of rhetoric: rhetoric works on the unstable and often misled emotions. Thus, eloquence wrongly used is a "very dangerous knife in the hands of a mad man."⁴⁰ And this view was not a minority opinion either. Almost as popular as the orator-as-civilizer myth was the myth of the Hellenistic philosopher Hegesias of Cyrene who, according to French author Jacques Amyot, "unfolding his eloquence in order to recount and put before [his auditor's] eyes all the miseries to which our life is subject, kindled such a desire for death in their spirits that many killed themselves of their own will, and King Ptolemy was constrained to forbid him very strictly speaking any more on such matter."⁴¹ Hegesias' words present two problems: first, his words inspire death, and thus disrupt the status quo, and secondly they are shown as opposing Ptolemy's wishes—the rhetor is not identified as the king but as an adversary to the *true* king. Thus, rhetoric, put in the wrong hands, could be used to challenge legitimate rule, if not inspire sedition and treachery.

³⁸ From Reborn, Wayne, A. *The Emperor of Men's Minds*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

³⁹ Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*. Quoted in Reborn, 33.

⁴⁰ Jean Bodin *Les six Livres de la Republique*. Quoted in Reborn, 52.

⁴¹ Jacques Amyot *Projet de l'Eloquence royale*. Quoted in Reborn; 81.

Regardless of how one viewed rhetoric, however, as a cure to savagery or civil disobedience or as a disease that inspired savagery and civil disobedience, the efficacy of rhetoric was the same—words had a force behind them that compelled action in men almost automatically.

In his book, Shallwyk also gives a reading of *As You Like It*, a play he considers to be obsessed with performative language as channeled through the complexities of marriage. He argues that Celia's protest against performing the role of priest and marrying Rosalind and Orlando—"I cannot say the words"—"may stem from her fear of the magical power of the words as performatives rather than from ignorance or forgetfulness."⁴² Celia is afraid that the words will take effect even if the action they perform is positive.⁴³ Here, words are bestowed with "beneficial magic," and it is this idea that Shallwyk returns to again and again. However, it is the performatives that are dangerous and which the Act of 1606 expresses anxiety over. Moreover, curses and oaths, the primary targets of the Act, are also prime examples of dangerous performative speech acts. Beyond blaspheming God, curses and oaths are dangerous because, by their very definition and use, they purport to enact what they claim. Consequently, whether the curse or oath is said in all urgency and seriousness, or on the stage of a theater, matters little. What matters is the force of the words; a force that for early moderns was all too real whether it was supernaturally or otherwise derived. Perhaps praying to Jove or cursing someone, in actuality or on the stage, *were* the same things for the force of the words, their ability to *enact* what they said, was what mattered.

⁴² Schallywk, 51.

⁴³ Celia could also be aware that it was illegal to hide one's identity while marrying and thus be afraid to break this law as well.

III

I will now turn to two early modern plays as specific case studies, one performed and published before the Act of 1606 and one performed and published after it, both of which are concerned with performative speech, particularly women's speech and curses and oaths. In examining the plays, I will be looking for differences between them that could be attributable to the act and the climate of fear that it both reflected and magnified. In *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), the witch's curse derives from her social marginalization and results in her interaction with the devil. While the witch never directly racks the name of God or the Trinity (an editorial move probably made in response to the Act), her words imply this sin, and her curse, used to exact harm on others, "*Sanctibecetur nomen tuum*," is a parody of the Lord's Prayer. Thus, cursing is presented as a blasphemy and a sin and consequently as a vulnerability to demonic inference, if not an invitation to possession. In *Arden of Faversham* (1592), on the other hand, the situation is more ambiguous, as some cursing leads to extreme judicial punishment, while other cursing is utilized as a means to fight social marginalization and dispossession. Moreover, some characters in the play, as well as some literary critics, identify this second type of curse as an instrument of God. In both plays, the problem of cursing hinges not only on identifying the true nature of a curse, but also on identifying its efficacy and consequences.

Before moving on to the texts themselves, it is helpful to examine the history of cursing in Renaissance England beyond what has already been said about Protestant agitation against blasphemous curses and oaths. In pre-Protestant England, cursing was

believed to either function as maleficium (literally bad magic) and thus as an invitation to the Devil, or curses were believed to channel God's power as they anticipated his divine plan.⁴⁴ The theological view on curses did not provide a clear-cut answer either, as the history of curses was contested in the church as well. In the New Testament curses were explicitly forbidden. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you (Luke 6:27-28), and Paul comments on this with the simple formula, "Bless them which persecute you, bless and curse not (Romans 12:14)."⁴⁵

Still the problem of biblical curses remained: if cursing was so sinful then why did God curse? St. Augustine attempted to solve this problem by claiming that curses in the Bible were either prophecies or signs of God's punishment based upon a desire for correction and not vengeance.⁴⁶ Centuries later, St. Gregory drew a distinction between two types of curses in the Bible: those that it approves, God's curses of correction, and those that it condemns, man's curses of vengeance.⁴⁷ In the centuries following, both types of curses were used to bolster anti-cursing arguments, but the former were also used to justify certain kinds of cursing. It came to be seen as a spiritual and social necessity that certain holy men have the power to curse, to channel God's divine justice and retribution.⁴⁸ For the laity this raised a critical question: if holy men could curse as long as their intention was to obtain justice and not revenge, then why couldn't lay people? Consequently, many people came to believe that they had this power.

⁴⁴ Thomas, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Scribner, 1971; pg. 502-512.

⁴⁵ It is of course this biblical rhetoric that the Protestant agitators capitalized on in their campaign against curses.

⁴⁶ Little, Lester. *Benedictine Maledictions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993; pg. 94-97.

⁴⁷ Little, 98.

⁴⁸ Little, esp. 99

With the Protestant Reformation, all cursing came to be seen as idolatry: a sinful bestowal of God's power upon human beings or a blasphemy of God's holy name, both of which threatened to bring down God's wrath.⁴⁹ Belief in providential cursing was maintained primarily by the laity, some of whom were crypto-Catholics. They believed that certain types of curses maintained their efficacy, and that the more justified the curser's anger, the more likely their curse would take effect. The curse was seen as a final resort to obtain justice when all else had failed, or when one was dispossessed or had no power to begin with.⁵⁰

Arden of Faversham begins with the mass dissolution of the monastic lands, an event that led to the increased wealth of rapacious landlords and the increased dispossession of men who had previously worked the land. This process was shortly followed by the iconoclastic phase of the Edwardine Reformation when all symbols of the old church, including the monasteries, were destroyed or converted for other purposes, and when all cursing was heralded as blasphemy. The primary curse depicted in *Arden* is spoken by one of the displaced men—Dick Reede, a farmer who has lost his plot of land to Arden. In cursing Arden and the land he has confiscated, Reede also subtly curses the developments of the Reformation—developments that have ironically challenged the power of the very curse he speaks. Some of the characters in the play, then, suggest nostalgia for both a Catholic kingdom and worldview, not only because it criticizes the changes initiated by the Reformation, but also because it allows for a specific type of curse that was associated with Catholicism. Consequently, Arden is not just a cuckolded husband, murdered at his wife's instigation, but also an avaricious

⁴⁹ Thomas, 503.

⁵⁰ Thomas, 505.

landlord whose murder is, if not in some sense justified, at least desired by many disenfranchised men. As Garrett Sullivan states, "For landlords to act as 'covetous worldlings,' to deny the reciprocal social relations that constitute the feudal ideal, to 'banish pity' as Arden does, is for them to run the risk of losing their everlasting dwelling places."⁵¹ And Dick Reede seems to recognize this when, in cursing Arden, he calls upon God to miraculously enact his revenge. In doing so, he not only confirms Arden's guilt but also confirms his own justification for desiring redress. Moreover, in calling upon God he elevates his own desire for vengeance to the supernatural realm and perhaps even to the sphere of correction. His curse, then, functions as an ordained means to fight dispossession:

God, I beseech thee, show my miracle
On thee or thine in plaguing thee for this
That plot of ground which thou detains from me—
I speak it in agony of spirit—
Be ruinous and fatal unto thee!⁵²

Reede's curse, his performative words which seek to enact what they describe—Arden's ruin—prove prophetic. Arden is murdered and his body is dumped on the exact plot of land that Reede curses. Moreover, "Arden lay murdered in that plot of ground / Which he by force and violence held from Reede; / And in the grass his body's print was seen / Two years and more after the deed was done "(Epilogue). An imprint of Arden's body remains on the land as, perhaps, a reminder both of Arden's covetousness and God's intervention on Reede's behalf, and thus as a sign of the justification of Arden's

⁵¹ Sullivan, Garrett A., Jr. "'Arden Lay Murdered in That Plot of Ground': Surveying, Land, and Arden of Faversham" *ELH*, (61:2), 1994 Summer, 231-52; pg. 232.

⁵² *Arden of Faversham*. In *Plays on Women*. Eds. Kathleen McLuskie and David Bevington. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999; XIII, 30-35. All other references to this work will be internally cited.

murder. Nowhere, however, does the text make it explicit that these occurrences are enacted or even ordained by God. Instead, the text presents the parallel circumstances of Reede's curse and Arden's murder and allows the audience to draw its own conclusions. In doing so, it highlights the paradoxical nature of a curse, and by association, of performative speech. Reede's curse could function as the ultimate form of performative speech, in that his words induce real physical effects, or these events could be mere coincidence in which case his performative speech, his curse, means (and does) nothing. If the later is the case, then the play subtly challenges the anxiety over performative speech and curses prevalent at the time.

Reede's curse is not the only curse spoken in *Arden of Faversham*. Rather, the text is obsessed with curses, oaths and their efficacy, and the play as a whole presents an ambiguous picture of performative speech. Alice, Arden's scheming, unfaithful wife, is most notable for her use of performative language, which she uses both to express and to secure her desires: "Oh, that some airy spirit/ Would in the shape and likeness of a horse/ Gallop with Arden 'cross the ocean/ And throw him from his back into the waves" (I. i. 94-97). Despite Alice's use of such language, however, she claims that words mean nothing. When attempting to justify her indiscretions with her lover, Mosby, she claims, "Love is a god and marriage is but words;/ And therefore Mosby's title is best" (I. i. 101-102). Marriage, which is the ultimate example of performative speech, is reduced to mere, empty words; the oath of marriage means nothing. Similarly, when Mosby tries to back out of Alice's scheme because of an oath he has sworn to another man, Alice chides:

What? Shall an oath make thee forsake my love?
As if I have not sworn as much myself
And given my hand unto him in the church!
Tush, Mosby! Oaths are words, and words is wind
And wind is mutable. Then I conclude:
'Tis childishness to stand upon an oath (I. i. 433-38).

Alice asserts that oaths (and all words) are as intangible as wind, and breaking them just as inconsequential. Yet, ironically, Alice frequently uses oaths to convince people of things, or to secure their allegiance. Alice's most notable use of an oath is also her most potentially dangerous. When Mosby turns against her, Alice comforts him by assuring him that he reins supreme in her life:

I will do penance for offending thee
And burn this prayer book where I here use
The holy words that has converted me.
See Mosby, I will tear away all the leaves,
And all the leaves, and in the golden cover
Shall thy sweet phrases dwell and thy letters dwell,
And thereon will I chiefly meditate
And hold no other sect but such devotion (VIII. 115-22).

Alice claims that Mosby's words will be her Word. Thus, in supplanting God's words with Mosby's words, Alice commits the major sin of idolatry, a sin associated with swearing and oaths. Alice words, then, function as a curse as she abjures God.

Consequently, Alice's behavior can be read as an invitation to sin and the Devil, just as Protestant agitators claimed that swearing and oath-taking were invitations to the Devil. Moreover, as a woman, Alice's performative speech is doubly dangerous and could lead to her identification as a devil or a witch, as women's performative speech does in *The Shrew* and *The Tamer Tamed*. The play, however, does not highlight these connections. Nonetheless, Alice and her fellow conspirators, most of whom also curse and break oaths

notoriously, are not left unpunished. Standing with the Mayor in front of Arden's murdered body, Alice cries out: "The more I sound his name the more he bleeds" (XIV. 4). Like Abel's blood that cries out to God from the ground and betrays Cain's guilt, Arden's blood bespeaks Alice's guilt. Here, she finally acknowledges the power that words have, as her words seem to draw forth Arden's blood as they simultaneously announce her guilt and prime her for the noose. In the end, then, Alice's speech does have consequences beyond her own designs. The play, then, overrides Alice's nihilistic beliefs concerning language and demonstrates how powerful performative speech is.

Despite Alice's execution, however, the play still allows for Dick Reede's curse, not only to go unpunished, but also to take effect. This could be possible because his curse may adhere to the rules that God's name is only to be "spoken but with feare and reverence;" however, in a Protestant world any kind of a curse is blasphemy. It is also interesting to note that it is a man who is able to curse in such a way, while Alice's words eventually come back to haunt her; moreover, while Reede's curse represents a pivotal moment in the plot, the play seems more concerned with Alice's speech. Overall, the play (written before 1606) seems less concerned with exposing the dangers of performative speech, and more interested in exploring just what performative speech is and what is its efficacy. Either way, however, the text allows a man to curse, not only to God, but through God and not "lose his everlasting dwelling place," a move made feasible by the play pre-dating the 1606 ordinance. Thus, the play presents a very ambiguous view of cursing and oath-taking—a view that appears to look backward to a Catholic time when certain justified curses were believed to take effect, even as other cursing and forms of speech were discouraged. The flexibility with which this text deals with curses is, I would

argue, not only a product of its ambivalent attitude towards performative language, but also a result of its being performed and published before the Act of 1606, when performative language onstage was a matter of concern and fear, but not yet to the extent that it would be after 1606.

The Witch of Edmonton deals with similar issues to *Arden of Faversham*, but its treatment of performative language, specifically cursing, is much different. Because *The Witch* was written in 1621, years after the Act of 1606 and two years before a similar ban on public cursing would take effect, it is reasonable to suppose that the Act of 1606 may have played a role in effecting these changes. *The Witch*'s most contested element, the connection between its two seemingly disparate plots, is linguistic. As Todd Butler writes, the plots are "unified by their common concern with the legal and performative power of words."⁵³ Thus, both *Arden* and *The Witch* are at core plays about language and its efficacy. Like *Arden*, *The Witch*, too, struggles with a societal shift from a medieval worldview to a Protestant worldview—a world of rapacious landlords, demonization of old pastimes, and an emphasis on the power and ubiquity of witchcraft; a charge that mostly befell old women who in the past had relied on the community's charity to get by and in its absence resorted to cursing.⁵⁴

The most obvious example of the performative power of words is displayed by Elizabeth Sawyer's cursing. Shunned, hated and abused by her community, Sawyer soon becomes desperate to possess the dark powers attributed to the maleficent witch; the very powers the community thrusts upon her. Significantly, witchcraft was thought of as a

⁵³ Butler, Todd. "Swearing Justice in Henry Goodcole and the *Witch of Edmonton*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, (50:1), 2010 Winter, 127-145.

⁵⁴ This trend would suggest a connection between the agitation against cursing and the rise of witchcraft. Swearing was a quick way to get oneself suspected for a witch.

form of performative speech: if a witch cursed someone out of anger or frustration, and the effects of her curse happened to come true—in sickness, accidents or untimely death—the victim would attribute his misfortune to the power of the witch’s curse.⁵⁵ Sawyer is driven to the breaking point, and calls upon “some power, good or bad” to help her obtain revenge: “Instruct me which way I might be revenged,” she implores.⁵⁶ Significantly, it is immediately after this soliloquy that the Devil first appears to Sawyer, in the form of a Dog, and promises to enact her revenge if she grants him “a deed of gift/ Of soul and body” (II.i. 133-34). This pact suggests a form of demonic possession: in exchange for her powers the witch cedes both body and soul to the Devil. Here, Sawyer’s words have real, material and supernatural effects; performative language is shown to be truly dangerous. In fact, the Devil goes so far as to attribute his ability to appear to her, and then possess her, to the act of her cursing. He exclaims, “Ho, have I found thee cursing? Now thou art mine own (II. ii. 121). The devil’s ability to appear to Sawyer is dependent on her calling him, and she calls him in the form of a curse.⁵⁷ Interestingly, however, Sawyer’s curse is a misfire, as by cursing, Sawyer attempts to obtain the power to enact her revenge, while the Devil claims her cursing has led him to obtain power over her. Still, her performative words *do something*—they invite the Devil in some capacity.

⁵⁵ Ideas from Thomas.

⁵⁶ Rowley, William, Dekker, Thomas and Ford, John. *The Witch of Edmonton*. In *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*. Ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986. II. i. 107-08. All other references to this play will be parenthetically cited.

⁵⁷ The Devil’s affirmation that it was Sawyer’s cursing that compelled him to come to her mirrors Mephistopheles’ affirmation in *Doctor Faustus* that:

“When we hear one rack the name of God
Abjure the Scriptures and his savior Christ
We fly in hope to get his glorious soul.
Nor will we come unless he use such means

Whereby he is in danger to be damned (Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus*. Ed. Sylvan Barnet. New York: Signet Classic, 2001; I. iii. 46-50). Cursing is a surefire way to invite damnation.

The need to regulate curses, then, is totally rational as the alternative is demonic visitation.

Interestingly, Sawyer's cursing mirrors Alice's cursing when she promises to "burn this prayer book," as Sawyer promises "to abjure all goodness, be at hate with prayer,/ And study curses, imprecations,/ Blasphemous speeches, oaths, detested oaths,/ Or anything that ill" as long as she obtains her revenge (II. i. 112-15). Where Alice's curse does not elicit any immediate response (except the one she desires from Mosby), Sawyer's cursing leads to her identification as a witch. Her psychological transformation into a witch is synonymous with her rejecting God and goodness in favor of the Devil and evil, just as it is a result of her harsh and unwomanly tongue. While Sawyer's cursing does not specifically mention God, her promise to "abjure all goodness" just as effectively casts God out of her life. Thus, where Alice is allowed to curse and abjure God and is only punished later, and then perhaps only for murder, Sawyer's curse is shown to have immediate and drastic consequences. In *The Witch of Edmonton* cursing has much higher stakes.

Rowley, Dekker and Ford obtained their source material for *The Witch of Edmonton* from an actual court case brought against Elizabeth Sawyer of Edmonton. The details of this case were described by Henry Goodcole, the Newgate prison chaplain, in a pamphlet entitled *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch.*" While Goodcole claimed that his piece presented only facts, and thus ran in the face of wild gossip, Goodcole obviously had ulterior motivation. As does the play, Goodcole attributes Sawyer's interactions with the Devil to her cursing, even while her testimony displays how her intention was not to conjure the devil at all; her words, then, were a

misfire.⁵⁸ Moreover, he attributes her ultimate conviction to her “bitter tongue” which fails to speak her innocent. Goodcole quotes Sawyer who confirms:

The first time that the Diuell came vnto me was, when I was cursing, swearing and blaspheming; he then rushed in vpon me, and neuer before that time did I see him, or he me: and when he, namely the Diuel came to me, the first words that hee spake vnto me were these: *Oh! haue I now found you cursing, swearing, and blaspheming? now you are mine.* A wonderfull warning to many whose tongues are too frequent in these abhominable sinnes; I pray God, that this her terrible example may deter them, to leaue and distaste them, to put their tongues to a more holy language, then the accursed language of hell.⁵⁹

Where Sawyer’s words give out (after quoting the Devil), Goodcole’s words come in and present what could be seen as a moral to the story—don’t curse. His primary message is not about witchcraft but about cursing. As a Protestant divine, Goodcole does not present an extraordinary message, but his means of doing so is quite sensational. Thus, “in both Goodcole’s pamphlet and the play, Sawyer provides an extreme example of transformative speech, for in cursing and compacting with the Devil, she ultimately becomes the witch she has long been presumed to be.”⁶⁰ Immediately after compacting with the Devil, Sawyer is taught the curse to mutter when she wishes ill upon others, and soon thereafter she bewitches a young man in order to enact revenge upon his father. While Sawyer’s words are believed to have real effects on the community around her—she is accused of cursing their cattle and bewitching their babes at nurse—her words, or lack thereof, as Goodcole emphasizes, ultimately bespeak her damned and guilty. “Her mouth was stopped with truth’s authority: at which hearing, she was not able to speake a

⁵⁸ In this case, then, Sawyer’s performative speech act misfired in that it led to something other than what she had intended—demonic inference. It is important to note, however, that regardless of intention cursing was shown to conjure the Devil.

⁵⁹ Goodcole, Henry. *The Wonderful Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer, A Witch*. London, 1621. *Early English Books Online*.

⁶⁰ Butler, 135.

sensible or ready word for her defense.” Alice’s words betray her guilt, while Sawyer’s lack of words betray hers. Ultimately, however, both women’s confirmed guilt and punishment are dependent on their tongues.

Elizabeth Sawyer is not the only person who comes into contact with the Devil in *The Witch of Edmonton*. Frank Thorney, the protagonist of the second plot, also comes into contact with the Devil, and this interaction results in Frank’s murdering his second wife Susan. As David Nicol surmises, “Sawyer’s meeting with the Devil is the result of her cursing, and Frank’s murder of Susan is the result of his bigamy which the dramatists see as a verbal crime like bearing false witness.”⁶¹ In marrying Susan, Frank has produced a misfire, his words, then, have consequences beyond what he intended—his is both a bigamist and a prime target for the Devil. Just as Sawyer’s crime is ultimately breaking an oath to God by cursing, so is Frank’s crime breaking an oath to God by abjuring his first marriage and committing the verbal and physical sin of bigamy. Thus, once again, the playwrights highlight the dangers both of breaking sanctioned oaths and of performative speech—cursing or saying “I do”—in general. Moreover, the play emphasizes how misfires can be just as dangerous as intentional performatives. In committing bigamy, a misfire, Frank intends only to secure his station in life, while its results are his interaction with the Devil and his act of murder. Moreover, whether Sawyer initially meant to call the Devil or not, whether her words misfired or hit their intended mark, her curses worked to that purpose.

Finally, the words of the community of Edmonton are shown to have great performative power, as it is *they* that originally construct Sawyer’s identity and tutor her

⁶¹ Nicol, David. “Interrogating the Devil: Social and Demonic Pressures in the Witch of Edmonton” *Comparative Drama*, (38:4), 2004-2005 Winter, 425-46.

in the black art of witchcraft. Questioning why her community has picked her as the object of their hate and malice, Sawyer recognizes that she fits her society's conception of a witch, and is thus constructed to be one:

'Cause I am poor, deformed and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischief than myself,
Must I for that be made the common sink
For all that filth and rubbish of men's tongues
To fall and run into. Some call me witch,
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one (I. i. 3-10).

As the "common sink," Sawyer comes to represent all that is dangerous and polluting to the community and is exiled from it. Consequently, she comes to actually desire the dark powers of the witch that the community has already attributed to her. In a sense, then, it is the power of the community's words that ultimately lead to her malevolent witchcraft and damnation. In a sense, then, their words, too, misfire—while they mean to degrade her position in the community they actually empower her over them, at least for a while. To quote Nicol, "the *Witch of Edmonton* thus manages to be doubly bleak: it highlights not only the power of devils, but also the power of social coercion to attract those devils."⁶² Furthermore, as I would argue, it highlights the power of language to construct, call upon, and enact evil, even as it shows that one is punished for using language in this manner. In *The Witch of Edmonton* language, particularly cursing and oaths, is unambiguously demonic and dangerous, even if used unintentionally.

In both *Arden of Faversham* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, the concern with performative speech rests heavily with women. This trend, as noted, can also be seen in

⁶² Nicol, 442.

the three versions of the taming story, where it is Kate's unruly tongue that compels her taming. The fear of performative speech is linked not only to curses and oaths, but also to women's speech, which was considered unregulated and thus dangerous. Moreover, the fear of women's transgressing tongues was linked to women's transgressing bodies—thus, Kate's words can be tamed by controlling her body, Alice's language betrays her sexual infidelity, and Sawyer's transgressing words open her body for physical intimacy with the Devil.⁶³ While no female actors were allowed onstage during this time, the plays still highlight this particular anxiety over women's performative speech, as does the very fact that women were prohibited from the stage.

The Witch of Edmonton, like *Arden of Faversham*, is obsessed with the efficacy of curses and oaths, and thereby of performative language. However, whereas *Arden of Faverhsam*, written before the Act of 1606, is freer to deal with performative language in all its ambiguities, and even presents a curse that does not damn but rather seems to channel God's power, *The Witch of Edmonton*, written after 1606, is much stricter in both its use of curses and its depiction of their consequences, Sawyer becomes a witch by cursing. Performative language in both plays is a source of anxiety, but in *The Witch* it is also a source of direct damnation. *The Witch* also manages to play with the extremes of performative language as it condemns the language of the villagers of Edmonton for their role in Sawyer's witchery and damnation. Ultimately, its outlook is scarier—it is not just curses and oaths that are dangerous if not damning, but, potentially the performative language of social interaction. Thus, while the Act of 1606 was written specifically to

⁶³ These ideas are indebted to Johnson, Sarah. "Female Bodies, Speech and Silence in *The Witch of Edmonton*." *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama*, (12:1), 2009, 69-91.

regulate religious cursing onstage, it betrays an anxiety over performative speech in general (and the texts demonstrate that this fear of performative speech rests heavily with women), an anxiety made all the more acute by the fear that it is ultimately unable to regulate such performative speech even as it changes the way in which performative speech was dealt with onstage. While the treatment of performative language varies, texts pre-dating and post-dating the Act of 1606 seem to agree that there is something in language that is not to be taken lightly—words are not wind, as Alice would have one believe, and an attempt to regulate them, however, difficult, is necessary to the safety both of the actors, theatre-goers and even the nation itself.

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