

“I’le Tell My Sorrowes Unto Heaven, My Curse to Hell”:

Cursing Women in Early Modern Drama

Lisa Marie Templin

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Department of English

Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa

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Abstract

The female characters in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*; Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*; Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian*; Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*; and Brome and Heywood's *The Late Witches of Lancashire* curse their enemies because, as women, they have no other way to fight against the injustices they experience. At once an extension of the early modern belief that words are "women's weapons," and dangerously beyond the feminine ideal of silence, the curse, as a performative speech act, resembles the physical weapons wielded by men in its potential to cause serious harm. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative and J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterances, this thesis argues that curses function as part of the cursing woman's performative identity, and by using speech as a weapon, the cursing woman gains a measure of social agency within the social order even if she cannot change her place within it.

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Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Queen Margaret asks, "Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven? / Why, then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses! / If not by war, by surfeit die your king, / As ours by murder, to make him a king!" (1.3.192-195). Using only her voice, Queen Margaret's curse invokes the unseen power of heaven to wish death and misfortune on her enemies. Early modern conduct books and pamphlets emphasised that a woman should be careful of "her speech, or rather her silence; for the ornament of a woman is silence... As the Eccho answereth but one word for manie which are spoken to her; so a maides answeere should be a word, as though she sold her breath" (H. Smith 38-39). Failure to conform to these feminine ideals incited condemnation. Uttering curses, or using one's voice to wish ill on another, therefore represents a significant transgression of this feminine ideal of chaste silence. In the drama of the period, however, several female characters, including Queen Margaret in Shakespeare's *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, Jacinta in Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*, Lucina in Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, and Elizabeth Sawyer in Rowley, Dekker and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton*, curse their enemies because, as women, they have no other avenue through which to fight against the injustices they experience. For these female characters, their speech, which is central to the performative production of a naturalized feminine gender identity, also becomes a weapon through which they are able to maintain, regain, or seize a measure of social agency.

Although much research concerning cursing in early modern drama has already been conducted by scholars such as David Bevington, Rebecca Totaro, Keir Elam, and Eric Byville, most of this research focuses either on cursing by male characters, on the

efficacy of the curse itself, or on the physical and mental origins of the curse in the cursing subject. While such research is extremely valuable, the relationship between the curse and early modern ideas about gender has been largely ignored. It is for this reason that in this thesis I will use Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative, her work on injurious speech acts in *Excitable Speech*, and J. L. Austin's theory of performative utterances to explore the dramatic representations of women who use speech as a weapon, focusing on the extent to which these speech acts subvert idealized gender expectations and grant the female character social agency or power.

A curse can be defined in several different but related ways: as the expression of the desire for misfortune to befall someone, as the invocation of an evil force, or as an act of speech intended to directly cause harm to another. As acts of speech, curses are particularly fascinating because they have the potential to represent what J.L. Austin defines as performative utterances: speech acts that perform actions rather than simply describing them (5). In the critical research into curses in early modern drama, however, very few scholars have investigated the curse as a performative utterance. Those critics who do touch on this issue either do so without a discussion of gender, or examine speech acts in dramatic works with only passing reference to cursing. For example, Kier Elam explores the performative aspect of the curse in "‘I’ll Plague Thee For That Word’: Language, Performance, and Communicable Disease," but links it to contagious disease rather than to a discussion of gender. He argues that there is a "triangular relationship between speech act, performance and epidemic" (20) in which the performative aspect of the curse as a speech act firmly links it to contagious disease. He notes that J.L. Austin's description of the infelicities of speech acts as "kinds of ill which infect *all* utterances"

(Austin 22) uses “precisely the same tropes of disease and contagion employed by Shakespeare” (Elam 26), which, for Elam, provides further evidence of the connection between speech acts and infection. In “How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts,” Eric Byville uses speech act theory to define the genre of “witchcraft tragedy,” arguing that “the tragic witch abandons ‘human’ language and resorts to a radically antisocial utterance, the supernatural performative; this speech act, rather than other characters, divinities, random chance, or fate, defines her character and determines her catastrophic end” (2). For Byville, the supernatural performative – a category that includes the curse as well as other magical utterances – is central to the definition of the genre of witchcraft tragedy, but he says very little about how this relates to gender despite the fact that the vast majority of stage witches were female characters. In *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England*, Gina Bloom uses Judith Butler’s theories to explore “early modern vocal communication” (14) in connection to gendered agency, but touches on curses only in passing, through their linguistic relation to women’s laments (92-94). Although Bloom argues that the “material link between lament and curse... provides Margaret, and then the Duchess [of York], with a robust model of vocal agency” (94), neither she, Byville, nor Elam examines the connection between the curse as a performative speech act and the performative production of the appearance of a gendered identity in the cursing subject.

Much of the critical analysis of curses in the early modern period has also tended to focus on either the efficacy of the curse or the understanding of the concept of the curse itself through its meteorological or supernatural connections. In “‘Why Should Calamity Be Full of Words?’: The Efficacy of Cursing in *Richard III*,” David Bevington

traces the efficacy of many of the curses in *Richard III* to a pattern requiring an intermediary self-curse on the part of the cursed subject. In *Shakespeare's Noise*, Kenneth Gross examines cursing and its various meanings in *King Lear*. He explores the curse as both an utterance and a state of being, connecting the curse to the play's iconic storm, while also theorizing at length about the curse itself, noting that curses exist "at the threshold between magic and prayer, [and seem] always to call on some power above or beyond the human, to invoke a daemonic or divine agent to back its promise of damage" (168). In her article "'Revolving This Will Teach Thee How to Curse': A Lesson in Sublunary Exhalation," Rebecca Totaro examines the internal conditions of the body that produce the physical act of vocalizing the curse by comparing Shakespeare's curses to early modern meteorological writing. She argues that the early modern view of the earth's elements as a macrocosm of the human body (137-138) provides an explanation for the curse's poisonous potential when viewed as "meteors of the body" (135), "forged from bodily heat and not entirely dependent on words" (146). For Totaro, the fiery origins of the curse within the cursing body explain not only the bodily conditions necessary for the curse to prove effective, but also the tendency for early modern curses to "call down a plague on those in range" (150). Bevington, Gross, and Totaro, however, do not address issues of gender in their analyses of cursing in Shakespeare. In this thesis I seek to build on this research by not only considering the curse's origin and effects but also examining the curse itself as a dually performative speech act: one that functions as both a performative utterance and a significant part of the cursing woman's performative gender identity.

Stemming from a long tradition of the belief that words had the power to “affect human beings and their relationships” (Hughes 512), as evidenced by the use of official curses in ancient and medieval religious and legal documents, in the early modern period, curses were believed to have the potential to produce material effects. As Keith Thomas notes in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,

although post-Reformation Protestants usually denied both the propriety and the efficacy of ritual cursing, they frequently believed that, if the injury which provoked the curse were heinous enough, the Almighty would lend it his endorsement. In Shakespeare's plays, the curses pronounced by the characters invariably work. This is not just for dramatic effect; it was a moral necessity that the poor and the injured should be believed to have this power of retaliation when all else had failed. (507)

While early modern beliefs about the efficacy of cursing did not always include a belief in the inherent power of individual words to produce material effects, the curse was understood to call on God – or other supernatural sources – to lend the curse its power, much like a blessing or a prayer. Much like prayer, in Thomas’s description, the curse “had no certainty of success and would not be granted if God chose not to concede it” (Thomas 41). The curse would only take effect if God chose, for whatever reason, to grant it power.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that curses were not always used only in dire circumstances. In his 1593 treatise, *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to Gods Word*, William Perkins warns against cursing “for God in judgement,

to punish such cursed speaking, often brings to passe such imprecations” (27). By way of example, he notes that

At *Newburge* in *Germany* a certaine mother cursed her sonne, saying, *Get thee away*, I would thou mightest *never come againe alive*: the very same day he went into the water and was drowned. Againe, a mother brought her child to the Universitie of *Wittemberge*, by reason he was possessed with an uncleane spirit: beeing demaunded how it came to passe, she answered in the hearing of many, that in her anger shee saide, *The devill take thee*, and thereupon presently the childe was possessed. And in our countrey, men often wish the plague, the poxe, the pestilence to their children, their servants, their cattell: and often it falles out accordingly.

(27)

While neither mother actually intended to curse her child, her curse nevertheless proved to be effective, showing that curses had the potential to be potent even if the cursing person did not fully intend for the curse to actually take effect.

Curses were therefore considered to be both dangerous and sinful because of the harm they wished upon other people. In fact, many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications such as John Taylor’s *Christian Admonitions Against the Two Fearefull Sinnes of Cursing and Swearing* (1630) espouse the belief that God “hath expressly forbidden us to Curse... therefore, if thou hast a desire of Eternall blessednesse, know that the way thither, is not by Cursing” (1). In his 1579 treatise, *A sword Agaynst Swearying*, Edmond Bicknoll also locates the sinfulness of “that detestable vyce, of banning and cursyng” in its tendency “to the dishonouryng of Gods name” (44). For

Bicknoll cursing not only “make[s] but a Maygame of the Lords reverence,” which could incite divine punishment, it also “forsake[s] the helpe of GOD, and procur[es] the vengeance due unto [the cursing person] by the Dyvell” (44).

Consistent with its perceived sinfulness, cursing was also closely connected to witchcraft. As Perkins warns, “when thou speakest evill, thy tongue is kindled by the *fire of hell*, and Sathan comes from thence with a cole to touch thy lippes, and to set them on fire to all manner of mischiefe... when men speake of good things, their tongue is the tongue of Christ: but in all manner of ungodly and cursed speaking is the devils language” (66-67). Using the devil’s language, the witch was thought to use curses, as well as other supernatural language such as charms and spells, to harm her enemies and create disorder and chaos. Like the justified curse which called on God to give it its power, in the early modern period, the witch’s curse was not usually thought to be simply magical in and of itself; instead it obtained that power by virtue of the witch’s contractual relationship with the devil. As Thomas Cooper notes in *Sathan Transformed into an Angell of Light* (1622), the efficacy of the suspected witch’s curse was often considered to be evidence of this relationship with the devil, and by extension, her status as a witch: “For when a bad tongued woman shall curse a partie, and *death* shortly follow, this is a shrewd token that shee is a *Witch*, because *Witches* are accustomed to execute their mischevous practises by cursing and banning, & this may be sufficient for examination, thogh not of conviction” (275). Although effective cursing on its own may not have been sufficient evidence for a conviction of witchcraft, this type of speech, which seemingly had the power to transform physical reality, was a strong indication of witchcraft and supernatural involvement.

As an act of speech, the curse is what J.L. Austin defines as a performative utterance: a speech act that performs an action in the utterance rather than merely describing something (5). According to Austin's definition, for an utterance to be considered performative, "the uttering of the words is... usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act" (8). By saying the words "I apologize," one performs the act of apologizing rather than simply describing a feeling or expressing the desire to make amends. Like "I apologize," many of Austin's examples of performative speech acts are what he later calls "*explicit* performatives" and "begin with or include some highly significant and unambiguous expression such as 'I bet', 'I promise', 'I bequeath' – an expression very commonly also used in naming the act which, in making such an utterance, I am performing" (32). While the simple grammatical structure of such explicit performatives makes it much easier to define and explore the speech act in theory, in practice many performative utterances do not have the same explicit grammatical construction but still produce the same performative effect. The cursing characters in early modern drama rarely say "I curse you", but in uttering their curse they perform the same injurious action as if they were using the explicit construction. In *Henry VI Part 2*, Queen Margaret curses King Henry by saying, "Mischance and sorrow go along with you!" (3.2.302). As the curse can later be seen as having been effective, the curse is not only a wish for "mischance and sorrow" to befall King Henry but also a creation of that condition in King Henry, the cursed subject.

Austin also notes that cultural conventions are inherently connected to the ability to say that one has actually performed the action of which the performative utterance is an accepted part. In order "to be said to have happily brought off ... [the] action" there

must not only be an “accepted conventional procedure,” but that procedure must also be followed correctly and completely by an appropriate person, in the appropriate circumstances (14). The phrase “I curse you” is therefore performative in that it not only performs the action, rather than merely describing it, but also in that there were conventional beliefs in the early modern period about the power of language to invoke higher powers to bring about the action. These beliefs fulfil the requirement for an “accepted conventional procedure” from which the curse derives its performative power.¹

As Mary Steible notes,

the 1580 ‘Act against seditious words and rumours uttered against the Queen's most excellent Majesty,’ in effect, made curses against a monarch’s body an act of treason, granting them a secular litigious power that they formerly lacked... Curses or words petitioning harm against others became meaningful in their feared ability to destroy or foresee the destruction of the monarch's body natural, not just in their sinfulness. (3)

¹ While the early modern belief in the power of language to cause physical effects fulfils this requirement for an “accepted conventional procedure,” there are no clear rules for what specific conditions would cause the curse to be effective. As previously noted, Keith Thomas argues that people believed that “if the injury which provoked the curse were heinous enough, the Almighty would lend it his endorsement” (507), suggesting that God would need to consider the curse to be justified in order for it to be effective, while William Perkins gives evidence to suggest that cursing could also have immediate powerful effects even if the curse was accidental or not meant in earnest (27). Where the curse derived its supernatural performative power was also a matter of debate, and even within a single treatise Perkins seems to be divided on this issue. On one hand he suggests that God “brings to passe such imprecations” (27) as a form of judgment or punishment for thoughtless cursing, while on the other he argues that “cursed speaking is the devils language” (67). This issue, however, is further complicated by the idea that, as King James notes in *Dæmonologie*, “the limites of [the devill’s] power were set down before the foundations of the world were laid, which he hath not power in the least jote to transgresse” (30-31). In this understanding, the devil only has the power to sway those whom God has permitted him to influence (4), while God can also employ the devil for his own purposes (5). Figuring out whether the curse’s performative power derives from God, the devil, or some strange combination of both is therefore a difficult task. However, despite the lack of agreement or clarity about the specific details regarding the curse’s power, these sources all agree that cursing does have the potential to be effective.

While in many parts of the world today, the necessary cultural beliefs required to support the performative power of the curse no longer exist, in early modern England it was accepted that words spoken in this fashion had the power to potentially cause physical harm.

As a speech act, the curse is by definition intended to injure or to harm another person and does so through the use of performative language. This ability of language to injure is something that Judith Butler explores more generally in her work on injurious speech acts in *Excitable Speech*. Building on Austin's theories of performative utterances to explore the injurious power of language, she argues that injurious speech acts blur the distinction between what Austin calls illocutionary and perlocutionary acts – those that perform the action in the moment of the utterance and those that lead to consequences that are separate from the original speech act. Although Butler's theory focuses mainly on the interpellative force of hate speech, I see the injurious power of the curse as very similar to the way that Butler describes the threat. She states that “although the threat is not quite the act that it portends, it is still an act, a speech act, one that not only announces the act to come, but registers a certain force in language, a force that both presages and inaugurates a subsequent force” (9). Cursing, like the threat, seems to be both illocutionary and perlocutionary, both performative and the precursor to injurious events that exist separately and beyond the moment of the initial utterance. To say in the most explicitly performative sense, “I curse you with mischance and sorrow,” one not only performs the action of the curse, thereby initiating the cursed state in the cursed subject, but also promises a future state of misfortune when the curse eventually takes effect. Using the power of language alone, the curse has the potential to injure both in the

moment of cursing and beyond, which makes the curse an especially dangerous speech act because it moves beyond the control of the speaker and presages an unknown future injury.

When the speaker is a female character, as in the plays that I examine in this thesis, the curse, as an injurious speech act, represents a powerful and potentially dangerous act of transgression against early modern requirements for acceptable feminine behaviour, while at the same time confirming the society's worst fears about the nature of women. In fact, there was often a great deal of discrepancy between early modern prescriptions for ideal feminine behaviour and assumptions about the behaviours that came naturally to women.² The early modern English woman was advised "to tip her tongue with silence" (Brathwait, *The English Gentlewoman* 84) in order to suppress what was believed to be her natural tendency toward talkativeness, which could easily have serious social consequences. In a society where the social reputation of the family was intricately connected to the economic prosperity of the household, gossip or slander had the power to maintain or destroy reputations, including the reputations of those who did the gossiping (Muldrew 154-157). A woman who frequently engaged in such behaviour would become known as a shrew who "goes weekly a-caterwauling, where she spoils their spiced-cupped gossiping with her tart tongue calletting", and would not only make "her husband's patience a fit subject to work upon, where his miserable ears are deafened with her incessant clamour" (Brathwait, *Essays Upon the Five Senses* 245), but also

² For ease of explanation, I will use the term "gender norms" to refer to the combination of both the prescriptions for ideal feminine behaviour found in conduct books and pamphlets, and the characteristics that were negatively gendered as feminine and thought to be an inherent part of women's "nature." I group both sets of characteristics and behaviours together under this heading because, as gendered characteristics, they contribute equally to the maintenance of a performative gender identity. In later chapters I will differentiate between the two where differentiation becomes important for my analysis of the plays.

could potentially disrupt the established social order within the community. Uttering curses is therefore far from the feminine ideal of chaste silence while still being inextricably related to early modern beliefs about “natural” feminine behaviour.

As early modern conduct books suggest, speech and the expression of gendered identity are intricately linked because what one says and how one speaks contribute directly to the appearance and maintenance of a virtuous gendered identity. This gendered identity is something that Judith Butler explores in her theory of gender performativity. She states that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Gender, according to Butler, is not instinctive or innate, but is learned and performed in order to navigate the social constraints that regulate gendered behaviour, including speech acts, in all aspects of society. It is not the fact that the body has sexual characteristics that are identified as either male or female that is the source of gender identity; it is the compulsory act of repeated and constant performance of gendered behaviour, prescribed by gender norms, that creates the appearance of a gender identity (*Bodies that Matter* 12). Connected to this understanding of gender identity as the product of the repeated performance of normative gendered behaviour is always “the possibility of a failure to repeat” (*Gender Trouble* 141) – the failure to continuously perform the behaviours that help to produce the appearance of a stable gender identity over time, which could therefore disrupt the appearance of gender as a natural or inherent quality.

In the early modern period, anxiety over the possibility that a person could cease to perform the behaviours thought to be natural to their gender can be seen most clearly

in pamphlets like *Hic Mulier* (1620) that denounced the fashion of women wearing various items of men's clothing. The pamphlet's anonymous author argues that

since the days of Adam women were never so Masculine: Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from Mother to the youngest daughter; Masculine in Number, from one to multitudes; Masculine in Case, even from the head to the foot; Masculine in Mood, from bold speech to imprudent action; and Masculine in Tense, for without redress they were, are, and will be still most Masculine, most mankind, and most monstrous. (265)

Punning on “gender”, “number”, “case”, “mood” and “tense” as grammatical terms, the author notes that along with cross-dressing, women's behaviours – their “bold speech” and “imprudent action” – make them appear “Masculine in their genders.” Elaborating further, the author later argues that because “Masculine women” don masculine attire and behave in masculine ways by speaking boldly, displaying an “aptness to anger” and “pursuing revenge” (270), they “are so much man in all things that they are neither men nor women, but just good for nothing” (269-270). In failing to conform to the norms of idealized feminine behaviour, according to the pamphlet's author, these women not only appear masculine, they also cease to belong to either gender category and are therefore “most monstrous” (265) and “good for nothing” (270). In this context, cursing, as one such potential deviation from the norms of idealized behaviour for women, could therefore also be seen as a “fail[ure] to do their gender right,” for which, as Butler notes, people are regularly punished (*Gender Trouble* 140).

What makes the concept of gender identity more complicated is that gender norms themselves are unstable. Butler states that gender is an “inapproximable ideal” (*Bodies that Matter* 237), a “set of social exclusions” (221) that ensures “the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, [and] implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation” (226). The gender norms that one must continuously perform exclude the possibility of their full embodiment because they represent the ideal to which one may aspire, but which one is rarely, if ever, able to perform in any perfect or continuous way. Significantly, they are also “social exclusions” which seek to clearly demarcate one gender from the other, but in the early modern period, these norms were also contradictory, eluding a straightforward differentiation. Moralists like William Whatley, for instance, prescribe an ideal of silence for women, while also acknowledging women’s “natural” propensity for talkativeness. In his 1617 conduct book, *A Bride-Bush*, Whatley locates the imperative for women’s silence in the idea that God made women to be submissive to their husbands, advising wives to tell themselves “I will not strive against GOD and nature.... I will confesse the truth, *Mine husband is my superior, my better*” (36). Only a few pages later, however, Whatley acknowledges that women may find a strict adherence to this ideal to be difficult:

I know this duty goes against the haire: for where there is suddenesse of wit, and scarcity of wisdome (as in most of this sexe comparatively) there is readiness to speake, and multitude of words; but amongst all wise-men, talakativenes of women (chiefly when it comes to loud and earnest words) hath bene reputed a fault most of all in the husbands presence. Now then

let women learne silence, and let the reverent account of their husbands
 worke in them a speciall moderation of speech whilst they bee in place.

(40-41)

While Whatley notes that women are by nature meant to be submissive to their husbands, which necessitates their deferential silence, he acknowledges that talkativeness also comes naturally to women – an apparent contradiction in early modern ideas about what it meant to be feminine.

Curses uttered by female characters then become particularly interesting when examined in relation to performative femininity. The cursing female is caught within this contradiction; in order “to do [her] gender right” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141) she must be silent and passive, but when she uses her words, which are supposed to come naturally to her, as weapons, does she cease to be feminine? There does not seem to be a simple answer to this question: silence and speech are, by definition, mutually exclusive states, but within the gender norms of the period, both are considered feminine – one, idealized, and the other, disparaged. So while the cursing woman ceases to live up to the ideal of feminine silence, her speech – even in its most unruly state – could still be seen as feminine. However, at the same time, as we can see by the impassioned denunciation of the “Man-Woman” in *Hic Mulier*, such angry, active, and vengeful speech could also be considered masculine.

In order to examine performative utterances in relation to performative gender, however, we must first consider exactly what is understood to be “performative” in each instance. Both speech acts and gendered behaviour are performative in the sense that, through their performance, they each bring something into being. The performative

utterance performs the action of which it is a part, and gendered behaviour produces the appearance of the subject's gendered identity. The difference, however, is that the performative utterance does so deliberately, with willed intent, and primarily in a single instance, while the performative production of gender is compelled by cultural constraint, and is, by definition, continuous. At first glance, these two performatives may seem to have little to do with one another, but when uttered by a gendered subject, the performative utterance, like all acts of speech, also becomes part of the larger, continuous, performative production of the appearance of gender – in this case, of femininity. The curse, however, with its active and violent nature and its similarity to performative utterances used in political and legal contexts, seems to be a much more masculine kind of speech act than those that, in the early modern period, were typically gendered as feminine, even disparagingly. How such apparently masculine speech could potentially disrupt the continued performative production of femininity for the cursing female subject – and the extent to which this disruption affects her own social agency – is therefore the focus of this thesis.

In order to explore this subject, each chapter will be devoted to a different type of cursing female character. Chapter One examines wives and mothers of the nobility whose curses have political implications in *2 Henry VI* (1591) and *Richard III* (1592-1593). Once poised on the margins of political influence, Queen Margaret, Lady Anne, and the Duchess of York curse the men who hold power over them after the loss of their husbands and sons, and, by extension, their access to political power. In these plays, the curse, as a performative speech act, combines elements of feminine lament with masculine action and the cursing women are able to manipulate traditionally feminine

modes of behaviour and speech in order to curse their enemies and regain a measure of political influence.

Chapter Two focuses on women who curse before and after they are raped in William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1622) and John Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian* (1614). Jacinta and Lucina engage in a verbal and physical struggle with their attackers, but failing to prevent the rape, they curse their attackers in response to their sexual violation. For the ravished woman, whose physical chastity is forcibly taken from her in the act of rape, the only way to disprove her complicity in her own sexual assault is through the use of her voice, which, paradoxically, could serve as further proof of her lack of chastity. Both Jacinta and Lucina are caught in the same double bind: neither speaking, nor staying silent will adequately prove their chastity. Although their curses occupy a contradictory role in their performance of gender as they struggle to maintain a virtuous gender identity, while potentially exceeding the proper performance of idealized feminine behaviour in the use of injurious speech, the curse, as a performative speech act also clearly shows their lack of consent to their sexual violation, while performatively enacting their own revenge against their attackers.

Finally, Chapter Three focuses on witches who use performative "witch-speak" in Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) and Brome and Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634). Although Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* is the only witch that actually curses onstage, the witches in *The Late Lancashire Witches* also use performative language in the form of spells, charms, and incantations to call on the supernatural power of the devil to enact revenge on their enemies and disrupt the existing gendered, economic and social hierarchies within their

communities. In these plays, the witches' language represents a rejection of idealized gender norms in favour of characteristics that are disparagingly gendered as feminine, which, combined with her supernatural power, grant the witch a measure of social agency. For Elizabeth Sawyer, Mistress Generous, Gillian, Mawd, Moll, and Meg, however, this agency proves to be only temporary since their supernatural power is no match for the legitimate patriarchal authority of the lawful magistrate: their demonic familiars abandon them, their powers vanish, and their communities heal by purging their disruptive influence with a warning to the audience about the dangers of unruly speech. For each type of cursing female character – the noble woman, the rape victim, and the witch – cursing represents a way for her to fight back against perceived injustices and regain a measure of social agency, using the only weapon she has left – her speech.

Chapter One

“In the Breath of Bitter Words”: Cursing, Femininity, and Power

in *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*

As wives, mothers, and queens, the women in Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2* (1591) and *Richard III* (1592-1593) are defined by their relationships to powerful men (Miner 41) and are poised on the margins of political influence. Their influence is powerful, but indirect, and when their husbands and sons are killed, their connection to their power dies as well. Lacking the embodiment of the male authority to act, the female characters curse their enemies. At once an extension of the early modern belief that words are “women's weapons,” and dangerously beyond the feminine ideal of silence, the curse is shown to have the potential to cause physical harm in much the same way as men's physical weapons. As a performative speech act, the curse combines elements of feminine lament with masculine action and seems to both support and undermine the characters' adherence to the norms of idealized feminine behaviour. The female characters' curses, however, function as part of the performative production of a feminine gender identity. Through their curses, cursing women do not reject feminine characteristics, but instead manipulate traditionally feminine modes of behaviour and speech in order to regain a measure of political influence.

Words and Action

In both *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, Shakespeare sets up a gendered hierarchy between words and action, that values masculine action more than the idleness and effeminacy of words. At the beginning of *2 Henry VI*, Warwick is frustrated with King Henry's surrender of lands captured in battle in order to secure peace and his marriage to

Margaret: “And are the cities that I got with wounds / Delivered up again with peaceful words?” (1.1.117-118). What Warwick and his men had laboured to accomplish with masculine action, Henry has easily undone with “peaceful words”: in a single political manoeuvre, Henry has traded the ground and strength that England gained against the French for the company of a woman. Richard uses a similar image in the opening scene of *Richard III*, equating the contrast between action and idleness with the difference between masculinity and femininity. He observes that

Grim-visaged war hath smoothed his wrinkled front,
 And now – instead of mounting barbed steeds
 To fright the souls of fearful adversaries –
 He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
 To the lascivious pleasing of a lute. (1.1.9-13)

Peace makes the masculine “grim-visaged war” effeminate as he neglects his duty to protect the kingdom in favour of engaging in idle activities in the company of women.³ While action is productive and involves strength and bravery, words and idleness undo that work and let strength and bravery go to waste. In gendering the categories of war and peace, both Warwick and Richard associate action with masculinity and words or inaction with effeminacy; in doing so they place words and action within the existing gender hierarchy that values men over women, masculinity over femininity, and by extension, action over words.

³ In *Engendering a Nation*, Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin note that “In early modern sexual discourses, an effeminate man was typically one who, like the inferior being, woman, let passion control his reason. To love a woman too much marked a man as effeminate, at the mercy of his emotions and his desire” (67).

Warwick's expression of frustration over Henry's disregard for his wartime efforts also connects Henry to the effeminacy of words, a connection that Queen Margaret further emphasizes in her dissatisfaction with her new husband. She had thought that Henry would be more like Suffolk, whom she admires for his "courage, courtship and proportion" (2 *Henry VI* 1.3.58), but instead Henry is much too focused on his own piety for her liking. She goes on to highlight the contrast between Henry and Suffolk in terms of the difference between words and actions:

His champions are the prophets and apostles,
 His weapons holy saws of sacred writ,
 His study is his tilt-yard, and his loves
 Are brazen images of canonized saints. (1.3.61-64)

While Margaret characterizes Suffolk as brave, active and exuding masculine charm, she sees Henry as the opposite. Henry's most admired combatants in war are the prophets and apostles that he reads about, sacred words are his weapons of choice, and his study is his tournament ground. Here Margaret shows that Henry is very much connected to language and inaction, preferring to be in his study rather than in the tilt-yard, which, as Margaret suggests, is a temperament better suited to the papacy than to kingship.

Although words are associated with femininity and idleness, in the public arena of the court, language is also connected to political and legal power, and the use of spoken language is often a powerful form of masculine action. In *Henry VI, Part 2* and *Richard III*, male characters often use what J.L. Austin calls performative utterances to confer status, swear oaths of loyalty, and arrest, banish, or sentence prisoners. With the statement "We here create thee the first Duke of Suffolk, / And gird thee with the sword"

(1.1.60-61), King Henry performs the act of creating the dukedom of Suffolk and confers status on the man who would hold that title. As Austin describes, here “the uttering of the sentence is...the doing of an action,” and Henry’s words cannot “be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something” (5). His words are more than just words; they are a form of linguistic action. In the performative utterance, the difference between words and action is negated as the words take on a performative power that allows them to function in much the same way as physical deeds. Furthermore, Judith Butler argues that some see this “performative power... as a linguistic condition of citizenship. The ability to use words efficaciously in this way is considered to be the necessary condition for the normative operation of the speaker and the political actor in the public domain” (*Excitable Speech* 81). In this sense, exercising full rights as a citizen involves the performative linguistic power to act through language.

Political action through performative speech, however, is limited to those who have the proper authority to act, and, in the early modern period, this excluded almost all women and any men below a certain social status. In *2 Henry VI*, the Cade rebellion highlights this distinction, showing that as Austin asserts “the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked” (14): the performative utterance must be backed by the proper authority in order to be effective. Cade leads a group of peasants in rebellion by falsely asserting a claim to the throne as a Plantagenet (4.2.36) and as a descendent of the house of the Duke of Clarence (4.4.28). Although Cade’s lower class background is clear in his prosaic speech pattern compared to the blank verse of the nobility, he uses performative utterances to imitate the masculine language of politics and authority to make himself a

knight and attempt to assume control of the kingdom: “I will make myself a knight presently. / Rise up, Sir John Mortimer”; “my mouth shall be the Parliament of England... And henceforward all things shall be in common” (4.2.106-107; 4.7.12-16). Although Cade claims that he is now a knight and his word is now law, his performative utterances do not actually create these effects. Instead Cade’s performative utterances are what Austin terms “unhappy” because of a misapplication of the procedure (17): Cade does not have the authority to make himself a knight or to change laws even though he is using the same linguistic patterns that usually perform these political actions.

Notably, what is most at issue in Cade’s rebellion is the power of language, and the socially contingent nature of that power. Cade’s unhappy performatives show that although language has the ability to make laws and confer status, the ability to use this type of language is contingent on the social class (or gender) of the speaker. In this case, as Butler notes, “the distinction between performatives that work and those that fail has everything to do with the social power of the one who speaks: the one who is invested with legitimate power makes language act; the one who is not invested may recite the same formula, but produces no effects” (*Excitable Speech* 146). Performative utterances used in the wrong context, or without proper authorization, do not have any inherent power.

Like Cade, the female characters in *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III* lack the authorization necessary for political performatives, but though their words lack political authority, in the plays there is still the sense that words themselves are potentially dangerous. Because the status of both men and women in early modern communities depended on the maintenance of virtuous and honourable reputations, community gossip

gave women “a particular standing in neighbourhood social relations. Telling stories and judging morals made women the brokers of oral reputation” (Gowing 123). It was through speech that women could indirectly gain a sort of power within their communities, but this power was considered potentially dangerous. Not only could such unruly speech damage their own vulnerable reputations (Richards and Thorne 10), but it had the potential to disrupt the established social order within the community as well.

In the plays, where women have access to political power, this power is often also indirect: their power is the power to influence, rather than to act directly. In *Richard III*, Richard casts Elizabeth and Mistress Shore as “mighty gossips in our monarchy” (1.1.83) suggesting that “this it is when men are ruled by women” (1.1.62). Although here Richard is merely attempting to hide the fact that he is the one who “set [his] brother Clarence and the King / In deadly hate the one against the other” (1.1.34-35) by shifting the blame onto someone else, by connecting female political influence with community gossip, Richard also highlights a cultural assumption about the indirect and often linguistic nature of female political power. Richard’s accusation suggests that, like “mighty gossips,” Elizabeth and Mistress Shore have used speech to undermine established social hierarchies and manipulate others – including the king – to indirectly achieve their political ends.

As a form of indirect action through language, the curse therefore seems to combine both masculine and feminine elements. Like the masculine speech acts that confer status, vow loyalty, and perform legal actions, the curse is a performative utterance in that it performs the act of cursing (Austin 8). As a speech act, the curse creates the cursed condition in the cursed subject at the moment of the utterance. The

cursed person is immediately cursed, but the effect of the curse is rarely instantaneous, so it also promises a later fulfillment of the curse at an unknown future point. This is much like how Butler describes the injurious effects of the threat: “the threat begins the performance of that which it threatens to perform; but in not quite fully performing it, seeks to establish, through language, the certitude of that future in which it will be performed” (*Excitable Speech* 9). While here Butler describes the threat as being connected to and the precursor of a later separate action, in the curse, these two actions are even more connected: the performative curse promises its own later fulfillment, a perlocutionary consequence of the original illocutionary act. These perlocutionary aspects of the curse, the unknown future event that the curse sets into motion, make it particularly dangerous in its potential: neither the cursed nor the cursing subject knows precisely when, how, or even if the curse will take effect. While the curse is not the same thing as a direct physical action because it is not instantaneous and therefore may prove ineffective, as an indirect route to achieving the same or similar ends, the curse is potentially much more dangerous because it is uncontrolled.

For Queen Margaret, cursing also requires a masculine vigour that she connects to bravery and action. When Suffolk appears to simply accept his banishment, she admonishes him for what she perceives as a feminine weakness: “Fie, coward woman and soft-hearted wretch! / Hast thou not spirit to curse thine enemies?” (*2 Henry VI* 3.2.309-310). As a man, he should be standing up for himself, fighting back against this perceived injustice, as she does through her curses on his behalf. Margaret understands that it takes spirit to curse one’s enemies, something that is both brave and masculine and is therefore active as well. In her article “‘Revolving this Will Teach Thee How to Curse:’ A Lesson

in *Sublunary Exhalation*,” Rebecca Totaro uses the early modern understanding of the earth’s elements as a macrocosm of the human body to examine the curse as a “[meteor] of the body” (135), “forged from bodily heat and not entirely dependent on words” (146). She argues that “by accusing Suffolk of lacking the spirit to curse, Margaret accuses him of lacking [the] vital heat” required to create a curse within the body (142). Indeed, while Suffolk doubts the efficacy of cursing, immediately before uttering his own curses, he describes the bodily effect of curses in terms of bodily heat:

Mine eyes should sparkle like the beaten flint;
 Mine hair be fixed on end, as one distraught;
 Ay, every joint should seem to curse and ban.
 And, even now, my burdened heart would break
 Should I not curse them. Poison be their drink! (3.2.319-323)

Suffolk’s description evokes the image of a fire starting within his body: his eyes are ready to ignite like the sparks from the flint used to start a fire, while each hair and joint responds to the curse that seems to originate in his “burdened heart” (Totaro 142).

Later, after Margaret interrupts his curses for fear that they should “like the sun ‘gainst glass, / Or like an overcharged gun, recoil / And turn the force of them upon [himself]” (3.2.332-334), Suffolk uses meteorological imagery to describe the bodily heat of his curse:

Well could I curse away a winter's night,
 Though standing naked on a mountain top,
 Where biting cold would never let grass grow,
 And think it but a minute spent in sport. (3.2.337-340)

As Totaro suggests, the bodily heat that produces the curse also seems to make his cursing body impervious to cold: the heat is so intense that Suffolk feels like he could stand “naked on a mountain top” in the middle of winter and not be affected by the frigid temperatures and biting wind (143). It is also important to note, however, that Margaret, who has stopped cursing at this point, responds to his alarming lapse in control with tears that she describes with a similar meteorological image: “O let me entreat thee cease. Give me thy hand, / That I may dew it with my mournful tears” (3.2.341-342). The opposite of Suffolk’s fire and heat, Margaret describes her feminine tears as “dew,” which she hopes will cool his body, extinguish the fire within him, and quell his curses.

This contrast between Suffolk’s fiery heat and Margaret’s dewy tears echoes the contrast between classical ideas about the biological difference between males and females. Galen of Pergamon, the classical physician whose writings remained one of the predominant sources of medical knowledge until the eighteenth century, cites a difference in bodily heat for the physiological difference between the sexes:

The male and female reproductive organs differ only in their degree of development... and this difference is caused by the male's greater supply of innate heat, which causes his organs to be turned inside out... and to protrude from the body. The female, on the other hand, less richly supplied with heat, is unable to give them the final eversion which makes them protrude, and so they remain inside. (56)

According to Galen, the male and female reproductive organs are simply inversions of each other due to a difference in bodily heat in gestation: the cooler female organs form inside the body, while the warmer male organs are able to emerge and form on the

outside. Much like Galen's description of female bodily fluids, when compared to Suffolk's fiery curses, Margaret's tears are "colder and wetter (for these things too follow of necessity from the deficient heat)" (48). Therefore, if, as Totaro suggests, the curse is "forged from bodily heat" (146) and the female body was thought to be cooler than the male body, it would seem that cursing is a masculine enterprise.⁴

Although cursing contains masculine elements, in *2 Henry VI* and *Richard III*, female characters curse with much greater frequency. For the most part, characters curse only when they have no other recourse to fight against what they see as injustice,⁵ and in this way, as Keith Thomas suggests, cursing is "a substitute for political action" (509). For the female characters who do not have an avenue to act, it is all they can do. Indeed, cursing was often associated with a position of weakness, and used only "by the weak against the strong, never the other way around" (509). Even official curses found in ancient legal documents were used as safeguards against situations where the law may not otherwise be effective in bringing offenders to justice. As Kenneth Gross notes, an official curse is needed when

⁴ What follows from Galen's one-sex model, however, is the early modern idea that women were very similar to boys since, as Stephen Orgel notes, "we all begin as female, and masculinity is a development out of and away from femininity" (20). Within the Galenic model, the biological distinction between the sexes is not absolute and numerous cases were recorded of women "completing the physiological process and turning into men under the pressure of some great exertion or excitement" (20). One notable example is of a young woman named Marie – later, Germain Garnier – who, at age fifteen, was chasing her pigs when the excess of heat from her physical exertion caused her genitals to turn inside out turning her into a man. If biological sex could be so easily transformed, it followed that masculinity and femininity were qualities that must be vigilantly maintained through behaviour and dress (19-20). Within this context, cursing becomes a particularly dangerous activity for women. Not only does cursing seem to move beyond the parameters of virtuous feminine behaviour, but within this model, cursing could potentially have an effect on the speaker's biological sex as well.

⁵ In *Richard III*, Richard curses as part of an attempt to seem as though he has done nothing wrong and that the things people have been saying about him are not true. Although his curse, "A plague upon you all!" (1.3.58) follows the linguistic construction that would make it a performative utterance, because the curse is unjustified it may not meet the conventional requirements in order for it to be expected to be effective and could therefore be interpreted as what Austin would term "unhappy" (14), which would explain why his curse does not seem to have any effect. Here, instead of saying Richard curses the people around him, we can say only that he tries or pretends to curse them.

the violator of a law may be too large or too small to be caught, too strong, too obscure, too distant in time or space; the criminal may be, in fact, as yet unknown, acting in secret; he may not even have acted at all, or be yet unborn. The use of curses points not only to the resentment of the disenfranchised, but to an uncertainty haunting the wishes of authority itself. (169)

Even in official documents, the curse was considered a way to bring justice even where there was no legal recourse to be had, and as such, in these plays, cursing becomes a way for “these dispossessed women [to gain] a measure of worldly power through otherworldly means” (Wifall 148). Even though they cannot legally punish or take revenge against those who have harmed them and their loved ones, they are able to call on God to help them.⁶

The plays establish God’s ability to intervene in human affairs fairly early on through the minor subplot of the conflict between Peter and his master, Thomas Horner, whom he accuses of treason for supporting the Duke of York’s claim to the throne. As Horner does not confess to treason, and instead accuses Peter of lying, the Duke of Gloucester sentences the two to “single combat in a convenient place” (*2 Henry VI* 1.3.212), trusting that “God [will] defend the right” (2.3.55). Trial by combat is based on

⁶ It is important to note here that not all curses necessarily call on God for their performative power. In William Perkins’s 1593 treatise *A Direction for the Government of the Tongue According to Gods Word*, he explains that “godly men when they speake gratioously, have their tongues inflamed with the fire of Gods spirite: so, contrariwise, when thou speakest evill, thy tongue is kindled by the *fire of hell*, and Sathan comes from thence with a cole to touch thy lippes, and to set them on fire to all manner of mischief. *Chrysostome* saith, that when men speake of good things, their tongue is the tongue of Christ: but in all manner of ungodly and cursed speaking is the devils language” (66-67). Perkins also warns, however, to “avoid all imprecations and cursings either against men or other creatures: For God in judgement, to punish such cursed speaking, often brings to passe such imprecations” (27). According to Perkins then, the curse’s performative power could either come from the devil to “set... fire to all manner of mischief” or from God, who would give the curse power in order to punish the cursing person for his or her uncharitable speech.

the belief of God's ability to participate in and decide the outcome of earthly legal proceedings. The two combatants would fight, often to the death, and "since God had presumably ensured the winner's victory, his cause was considered to be vindicated" (Stuhmiller 427). Although, theoretically, skill in hand to hand combat should not matter if he is telling the truth, Peter does not know how to fight, and reacts to the pronouncement as if it were a death sentence: "Alas, my lord, I cannot fight; for God's sake, pity my case! The spite of man prevaieth against me. O Lord, have mercy upon me – I shall never be able to fight a blow! O Lord, my heart!" (1.3.220-223). He has good reason to be convinced that Horner, the significantly more skilled swordsman, will prevail when matched against him in single combat. Horner, much too assured of his own victory, gets drunk and loses the fight, confessing to treason as he dies. Peter's unlikely victory over Horner is then taken as proof that God is on the side of the innocent and has the ability to intervene in earthly matters. What is even more relevant though is how divine intervention works in this particular case: Peter is not suddenly invested with skills that he did not possess before, but instead, Horner gets drunk and loses a fight he could have easily won. If indeed this is divine intervention (and within the worldview of the play the belief is clearly that it is) it is also clear that God's influence works in subtle and indirect ways. Moreover, if God is on the side of the innocent or the weak and can answer Peter's prayers to ensure his victory, then God can give power to curses as well.

Cursing and Performative Femininity

Although cursing contains both masculine and feminine elements and therefore seems to both support and undermine the performative production of a coherent feminine gender identity, in the plays, the female characters are able to maintain their performance

of femininity through the curses themselves. In its expression of her grief over her loss of Suffolk's companionship, Margaret's first curse – "Mischance and sorrow go along with you! / Heart's discontent and sour affliction / Be playfellows to keep you company!" (3.2.302-304) – represents a form of lament, which, as Marguerite A. Tassi argues, is a feminine activity. She argues that "curses and lament represent two time-honored feminine vehicles for expressing grief, moral outrage, and a sense of injustice" (66).⁷ As an extension for her love for Suffolk, Margaret's lamenting curse is therefore in keeping with her performative production of a feminine gender identity despite her own emphasis on the masculine aspects of cursing. Earlier, however, Margaret questions the point of crying or lamenting: "Might liquid tears, or heart-offending groans, / Or blood-consuming sighs recall his life, / I would be blind with weeping" (3.2.60-62). Although here she is attempting to mask her true reasons for not crying over the Duke of Gloucester's death, by questioning the efficacy of lament, she shows a definite preference for action. Indeed, later, in *3 Henry VI*, Margaret acts on her husband's behalf, as a proxy for his kingly, male authority. Where there is no possibility of direct action, however, cursing becomes a way to counteract the perceived ineffectiveness of traditionally feminine modes of reacting to injustice, combining the feminine linguistic elements of lament with the ability to act through language that the performative utterance provides.

⁷ In her discussion of curses in Shakespeare, Tassi mentions Queen Margaret only briefly, focusing instead on the Duchess of York's maternal curse in *Richard III*. In reference to Queen Margaret's curses, Tassi notes that "the mourning widows in *Richard III* are often perceived by critics as impotent, even pathetic. The performance history of *Richard III* reflects a long-standing trend in muting the effect of the widows. Their lines are often reduced in number, and the character of Queen Margaret is sometimes cut, as she was long ago in Colley Cibber's revised text. Two well-known film versions of *Richard III*, the first directed by Laurence Olivier (1955) and the second by Richard Loncraine (1995), also dispensed with Margaret. The shared assumption of many directors and critics is that the women's cursing is impotent, repetitive, and paralyzing, a kind of annoying stopgap in the flow of historical action in the play... This perspective, however, fails to consider the collective symbolic, somatic, and ritual power of cursing, wailing, and lamenting past wrongs, especially as it strikes listeners' ears and eyes in the theater" (71-72).

Like Margaret's curses, Anne's curses at the opening of *Richard III* also combine elements of feminine lament with the power to act through performative language. Cursing after the loss of her husband, she invokes the ghost of King Henry, God's anointed deputy on Earth:

Thou bloodless remnant of that royal blood:
 Be it lawful that I invoke thy ghost
 To hear the lamentations of poor Anne,
 Wife to thy Edward, to thy slaughtered son,
 Stabbed by the selfsame hand that made these wounds. (1.2.7-11)

Here she identifies the curses that immediately follow as her "lamentations" spoken in grief, through tears which she describes as "the helpless balm of my poor eyes" (1.2.13). Though her words take the form of curses, Anne participates in a form of ritualized feminine lament that, as Paige Martin Reynolds and Marguerite Tassi suggest, has the effect of "maintain[ing] the memory of the dead" (Reynolds 20), by "calling to mind unpunished crimes, urging the gods or an avenger to take up the cause of the wronged" (Tassi 67). Anne's curses fulfill this ritualized function while serving as an indirect, feminine substitute for active revenge. Though only a substitute for direct action, as Thomas notes, a "formal imprecation could be a powerful weapon. It exploited the universally held belief in the possibility of divine vengeance upon human evil-doers, and it could strike terror into the hearts of the credulous and the guilty" (510). Indeed, Anne does call on God to give her curses their performative power, saying "O God, which this blood mad'st, revenge his death" (1.2.62). With the power of God behind her, Anne's curse – "O, cursed be the hand that made these holes, / Cursed the blood that let this

blood from hence, / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it” (1.2.14-16) – follows an existing convention for invoking God’s power and performatively creates the cursed condition in Richard, the cursed subject.

Anne’s curses, however, prove to be dangerous not just to Richard but to herself as well. Like acts of gossip that gave early modern women a certain amount of power in their communities as “the brokers of oral reputation” (Gowing 123), once uttered the curse moves beyond the control of the speaker and takes on a life of its own, creating what Austin calls “perlocutionary act[s]” – consequences of the original speech act which “may be ‘unintentional’” (107). Not only could gossip – thought to be a distinctly feminine mode of social interaction – grow and spread beyond the original intention of the original speaker, giving rise to a great deal of anxiety in the early modern period about unrestrained female speech, it also had the potential to rebound and harm the gossiping female herself, damaging her own fragile reputation. Anne’s self-curses have similar unintended and potentially self-damaging perlocutionary effects: her first self-curse is an example of what Austin calls a “perlocutionary sequel” (118) – a secondary consequence of her curse – which moves beyond her immediate control. Anne curses Richard by saying, “If ever he have wife, let her be made / More miserable by the death of him / Than I am made by my young lord and thee” (1.2.26-28), cursing Richard’s future wife with no way of knowing that she will one day become that wife.⁸ Anne’s self-curse is a perlocutionary consequence of her curse on Richard that is set in motion by the original speech act but goes beyond her original intention. Cursing then, in its perlocutionary potential, seems to function in a similar way to gossip: both cursing and

⁸ This curse technically does not prove to be effective because it calls for his wife to be “made / More miserable by the death of [Richard] / Than I am made by my young lord and thee” (1.2.26-28), and while Anne is certainly made miserable by the marriage, she does not actually live to see Richard’s death.

gossiping grant the female speaker a measure of social power, but that power is potentially dangerous since the effects of speech cannot be completely controlled once the words have been uttered, and there is nothing to prevent the effects of those words from rebounding on the speaker herself.

Richard, as the play's villainous master-manipulator, seems to recognize the dangerous potential of these perlocutionary effects but uses them to his advantage, using what Kristin M. Smith calls "Richard's feminine linguistic power" (154) to manipulate the outcome of Anne's curse in order to turn it against her.⁹ In her discussion of hate speech, Butler examines the potential to combat hate speech by "appropriating, reversing, and recontextualizing such utterances" to minimize their injurious effects (*Excitable Speech* 39). Richard seems to use a similar type of action to take advantage of and manipulate the perlocutionary aspect of Anne's words, changing the meaning of the outcome of her curse before it has a chance to happen. Butler argues that "if the performativity of injurious speech is considered perlocutionary (speech leads to effects, but is not itself the effect), then such speech works its injurious effect only to the extent that it produces a set of non-necessary effects" (39). This means, that because the curse's effect is not instantaneous and the curse only promises its future fulfillment – a fulfillment that is not guaranteed – it stands to reason that Richard could have the opportunity to recontextualize the meaning of her curse before it takes effect, thereby preventing it from fulfilling its intended outcome. Richard and Anne engage in a verbal battle of wits where she uses her sharp tongue to counter everything he says. Knowing that Anne will counter his words with her own, he is able to manipulate her words to

⁹ Although here Kristin M. Smith describes Richard's attempts to turn Margaret's curses against her, a similar scene which I will discuss in greater detail in the following section, I would argue that Richard uses the same technique of linguistic manipulation in this scene, but with much greater success.

produce a second self-curse. Richard attempts to flatter her by comparing her beauty to the sun, saying that “As all the world is cheered by the sun, / So I by that: it is my day, my life” (1.2.129-130), which she then counters with a curse: “Black night o’ershade thy day, and death thy life” (1.2.131). She means her curse to be literal, calling on the darkness of night to overshadow his days and end his life, but he pre-emptively introduces a metaphoric meaning to these words, and by reminding her of it, he twists her words into a self-curse: “Curse not thyself, fair creature: thou art both” (1.2.132). Accepting this self-curse as a consequence of what she must do in order “to be revenged on thee” (1.2.133), this second self-curse later proves to be effective: Anne is miserable and dies early.

Notably, however, Richard also interprets Anne’s attack on him as Anne moving beyond the bounds of virtuous femininity. He suggests that she “know[s] no rules of charity, / Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses” (1.2.68-69), but I would argue that, even when she curses, Anne never actually ceases her performance of femininity. As Butler explains, “the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice,... but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (*Bodies that Matter* 231). In her cursing, Anne may not conform to the virtuous feminine requirement for charity, but her attack on Richard could instead be considered shrewish, which is also a feminine, though a negative, category. Anne’s performance of femininity is further emphasized by her preference for words over action. Richard tests her resolve by giving her the chance to kill him, knowing that she cannot bring herself to take it: “Arise, dissembler. Though I

wish thy death, / I will not be thy executioner” (1.2.172-173). Though she is able to use her words to berate and curse Richard, wishing for his death, she cannot bring herself to actually step outside the bounds of the feminine gender roles that prevent women from taking direct action.

Similarly, when Margaret reappears in *Richard III*, cursing her enemies and lamenting her loss of power, Richard accuses Margaret of behaving beyond the bounds of acceptable femininity in order to force her back into a more virtuous feminine role – a role which is defined by its lack of power in a patriarchal system. He calls her a witch: “Foul wrinkled witch, what mak’st thou in my sight?” (1.3.164) and later, “Have done thy charm, thou hateful, withered hag” (1.3.212). By using the word “charm,” he highlights the connection between curses and the type of language used in witchcraft. Moreover, by calling her a “hateful withered hag” – language that would often be used to describe a female, but is not in itself a feminine term – Richard also equates Margaret with other dangerous female voices, showing that Richard sees her uncontrolled female voice as dangerous and a potential threat. As these accusations come from the play’s villain, however, it is also important to note that Richard’s suggestion that Anne and Margaret move beyond the acceptable limits of feminine behaviour cannot be taken as simply straightforward warnings. While somewhat truthful – Anne and Margaret do not conform to some of the conventional requirements for virtuous feminine behaviour – the audience would recognize that through these accusations Richard uses gendered expectations as an attempt to unfairly manipulate the women into silence, thereby minimizing the threat they pose to his domination.

Although through her cursing, neither Anne nor Margaret maintains a performance of a *virtuous* femininity, Margaret's curses themselves can also be interpreted as feminine. Although by definition her curses are performative utterances, and therefore follow a linguistic pattern most often seen in political and legal language, her curses differ markedly from conventional political or legal performatives. Instead of following the explicit structure like Suffolk's "I... arrest you in his highness' name" (2 *Henry VI* 3.1.136) that, as Austin explains, "begin[s] with or include[s] some highly significant and unambiguous expression ... very commonly also used in naming the act, which in making such an utterance, I am performing" (32), the curses uttered by female characters take a more inexplicit structure than masculine political or legal performatives,¹⁰ reflecting what could be considered to be a more "feminine" speech pattern and preference for indirect action.

Significantly, the emotional source of the curse is also a feminine one. When Margaret teaches the other women to curse, she explains how to make their words "sharp and pierce like [hers]" (*Richard III* 4.4.125). She advises them to

Forbear to sleep the nights, and fast the days;

Compare dead happiness with living woe;

Think that thy babes were sweeter than they were,

¹⁰ There are a few exceptions to this general rule. In *Richard III*, Anne's curse, "O cursed be the hand that made these holes, / Cursed the blood that let this blood from hence, / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it." (1.2.14-16) is the closest that female curses come to the explicit performative construction of "I curse you." Occasionally performatives uttered by male characters use a more inexplicit construction as can be seen in Suffolk's curses (2 *Henry VI* 3.2.311-330), but it is important to note that in this case Suffolk is in a similar situation to the cursing females as he also curses after the loss of his political power. Gloucester and Cade, the only other male characters to curse in 2 *Henry VI*, curse much more explicitly. When Gloucester, who has served as Lord Protector for the entirety of Henry's reign, is arrested, his curse – "Beshrew the winners, for they played me false!" (3.1.184) – uses the word "beshrew", meaning "curse", thereby explicitly naming the act which he is performing much like the political and legal performatives he is used to uttering. Cade's curse when his followers turn on him – "God's curse light upon you all" (4.7.173-174) – is similarly explicit and is therefore in keeping with his feigned air of authority.

And he that slew them fouler than he is.

Bett'ring thy loss makes the bad causer worse.

Revolving this will teach thee how to curse. (4.4.118-123)

Along with sleep deprivation and fasting, as Totaro notes, Margaret “councils self-deception” (145) to use the imagination to strengthen the emotional source of the curse. When Margaret tells the other women to imagine their “babes were sweeter than they were / And he that slew them fouler than he is,” (4.4.120-121) she suggests they emphasize their maternal, and therefore distinctly feminine, connection to their murdered children and distance themselves from the man who murdered them, thereby preventing feminine remorse or empathy. Margaret’s advice is tailored to their uniquely feminine situation and seeks to both emphasize and minimize their emotional connections to those involved. Cursing, then, is as much a part of their continued performance of femininity as it is a deviation from it.

Despite Margaret’s advice, the other women are still sceptical about the power of words as compared to physical action. Queen Elizabeth describes their potential curses as “Windy attorneys to their client woes, / Airy recorders of intestate joys, / Poor breathing orators of miseries” (4.4.127-129). Here she sees their words as little more than wind, air, or the breath that it takes to produce them, akin to other impotent expressions of grief like feminine lament (Tassi 71-72). However, it is also important to note that she describes these words as “orators” and “attorneys to their client woes” – both conventionally masculine professions – which further links the curse as a speech act to masculine action. Like a male lawyer, the curse acts on behalf of the client who is unable to act on his or her own, and while both curses and attorneys can occasionally be wordy and ineffective,

they are often needed to combat injustices. But whatever the potential efficacy of these “windy attorneys”, the women agree that even if they “help nothing else, yet do they ease the heart” (4.4.131). Given the emotional source of the curse, the curse itself, like feminine lament, is at the very least, an emotional release.

Although Queen Elizabeth claims to have “far more cause” to need such an emotional release, she acknowledges that she has “much less spirit to curse” (4.4.197). Unlike the other women who do curse their enemies, when Richard tells her of his plan to marry her daughter, Elizabeth is presented with the possibility of an active form of revenge. Elizabeth is able to use her maternal power, granted to her in the absence of her husband, to decide whom her daughter will marry. Although the arrangements for her daughter’s marriage take place offstage, the audience later finds out that “the queen hath heartily consented” that Richmond, not Richard “should espouse Elizabeth her daughter” (4.5.17-18). By exercising her maternal right, Elizabeth is able to enact what Tassi calls “a satisfying bloodless revenge on Richard III” (73). Fighting back in whatever way she can, Elizabeth’s ability to act seems to eliminate her need to actually curse Richard.

Cursing and Female Power

For the female characters that have no other recourse but to curse their enemies, cursing allows them to regain a measure of political power. Although subtle at first, this power is evident in the way that their enemies react to their curses as they utter them, and later becomes even more evident in the material effects of their curses as the curses begin to take effect. When Margaret curses her enemies at the beginning of *Richard III*, Richard’s response to her curses reveals his belief in the potential power of her words. First he attempts to silence her by reminding her that she was once the subject of York’s

curse,¹¹ suggesting that “His curses then, from bitterness of soul / Denounced against thee, are all fall’n upon thee, / And God, not we, hath plagued thy bloody deed” (1.3.176-178). Here Richard points to Margaret’s previous brutality to question her right to curse them at all, but in doing so, he also reveals his own belief in the efficacy of cursing. Margaret then uses this to her advantage, launching in to her own curses: “Can curses pierce the clouds and enter heaven? / Why then, give way, dull clouds, to my quick curses!” (1.3.192-193). Having failed to silence her, Richard attempts to cut off her subsequent curses so she cannot complete them. First he interrupts her long chain of curses before she has a chance to curse to him (1.3.212), then interrupts her a second time, attempting to turn her curse back upon herself like he did with Anne. When Margaret attempts to “make the period to [her] curse” (1.3.236), Richard substitutes her name for his, claiming “‘Tis done by me, and ends in ‘Margaret’” (1.3.237). Although David Bevington argues that “Margaret herself has unwittingly joined those who have cursed themselves” (16), I would argue that Richard is unsuccessful in his attempt to shift the curse’s target. In the case of Anne’s self-curse, Richard recontextualizes her curse by reinterpreting the meaning of the words that she has already spoken; however, he is unable to do this effectively with Margaret. Throughout her curse, it is clear she is speaking directly to Richard: “thee, the troubler of the poor world’s peace” (1.3.218). Although Richard is able to prevent Margaret from pronouncing his name in conjunction with her curse, by the time he is able to do so, she has finished cursing and shifted her focus instead to hurling insults at him:

Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,

¹¹ York utters his curse in *3 Henry VI* – “There, take the crown – and with the crown, my curse: / And in thy need such comfort come to thee / As now I reap at thy too cruel hand” (2.1.165-167) – when he is in a position of powerlessness with no ability to act. In that scene, Margaret is in a position of power.

Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity
 The slave of nature and the son of hell,
 Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb,
 Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins,
 Thou rag of honour, thou detested— (1.3.225-230)

While abusive, these insults are merely descriptive rather than performative, and because Richard cannot change the earlier “thou” to whom she was speaking when she delivered her performative curse, he is unable to effectively redirect her curse as a perlocutionary consequence. Instead, Richard succeeds only in diverting Margaret's attention to Elizabeth who suggests that she has “breathed [her] curse against [herself]” (1.3.238). Richard's attempts to silence, interrupt, and redirect Margaret's curses, however, reveal his belief in the potential power of her words.

When characters respond more sceptically to Margaret's curses, she is able to use this response to her advantage, making use of the fact that her curses are perceived as trivial: as simply words rather than direct physical action. When Dorset dismisses her saying “Dispute not with her: she is lunatic” (1.3.252) he seeks to discredit her unruly female speech, but in doing so, he also gives her the leave to speak. In fact, Rivers acknowledges this leeway, saying, “I muse why she's at liberty” (1.3.303). As Lisa Jardine explains, “The woman's voice as prophetic outsider links her with the traditional fool” (115), and as such “the female shrew/scold/prophet acquires, on this account, the verbal (and at some times physical) licence of the fool in motley, or the acerbic melancholic. She utters (and acts) with impunity, under the extended privilege of the Misrule carnival” (117). This “scold's privilege” (118) here allows Margaret to speak, but

her speech is not taken seriously. Indeed Buckingham dismisses the efficacy of her curses “for curses never pass / The lips of those that breathe them in the air” (1.3.283-284), despite the fact that he later acknowledges that his “hair doth stand on end to hear her curses” (1.3.302). Margaret is given the power to speak because the men do not fear her: after all, her curses are just words.

Margaret’s curses, however, do prove to be effective eventually, showing that through her curses she has the power to influence political events. In fact, the effects of justified curses were believed to be inevitable (Watson 25) and long-lasting as they “might leave [their] mark on later generations” (Thomas 505), but they were rarely believed to be instantaneous. When Margaret initially utters her curses, her words may not be taken seriously, but later Grey, Rivers, Hastings, and Buckingham, the subjects of Margaret’s curses, all recognize that “now Margaret’s curse is fall’n upon our heads” (3.3.14) as her curses take effect. On his way to the gallows, Buckingham concedes, “Thus Margaret’s curse falls heavy on my neck” (5.1.25), attributing his execution to Margaret’s curse as if it were the blade that would sever his head. This recognition of the curse’s effect gives Margaret power retroactively: the enemies she has already cursed understand her words to be the source of their downfall, and any future curses become dangerous. When the curse is understood to have the potential to be effective then cursing becomes a way for female characters to regain at least a small measure of power.

Indeed, the curses have the ability to incite fear in Richard, and he attempts not to hear the curses as his own way to prevent them from having power over him.¹² Not only

¹² Although Bevington also notes that Richard “goes to extraordinary lengths to avoid being cursed directly to his face” (15), there is no evidence to suggest that this was a recognized method to avoid becoming the subject of a curse. In fact, Gross notes that curses were often used to target violators of the law who were

does he attempt to silence Margaret's initial curses with interruptions, when he is later faced with the women's barrage of "bitter words" (4.4.133), he calls to his men,

A flourish, trumpets! Strike alarum, drums!

Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women

Rail on the Lord's anointed. Strike, I say!

Either be patient and entreat me fair,

Or with the clamorous report of war

Thus will I drown your exclamations. (4.4.149-154)

With flourishes of trumpets and the drums that would signify a call to arms, Richard intends to combat their words with noise of his own in order to drown out their sound before the heavens can hear them and lend divine support to their performative power. Moreover, by using the same language as he would to call men to arms to combat an army of soldiers, Richard is also responding to their words as if they are the equivalent of physical weapons, expressing his willingness to use his own physical weapons to combat them if necessary. Here Richard not only acknowledges the potential power of their curses, he also places them on the same level as physical action.

By the end of the play, the Duchess's curse on Richard, her son, also proves to be effective, showing that through her curse she effectively has the power to help depose a king. She curses him:

Therefore take with thee my most heavy curse,

Which in the day of battle tire thee more

Than all the complete armour that thou wear'st.

"too distant in time or space" to be brought to justice, suggesting that it was thought to be entirely possible to effectively curse someone *in absentia*.

My prayers on the adverse party fight,
 And there the little souls of Edward's children
 Whisper the spirits of thine enemies,
 And promise them success and victory.
 Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;
 Shame serves thy life, and doth thy death attend. (4.4.188-196)

Here she prays for Richard's demise and call on the souls of Edward's children to cheer on his enemies, intending her words to make him tired in battle, thereby helping to bring about a shameful and bloody end to his life. Later, the ghosts of the young princes do appear along with Richard's other enemies to curse him on the eve of his battle with Richmond:

Dream on thy cousins, smothered in the Tower.
 Let us be lead within thy bosom, Richard,
 And weigh thee down to ruin, shame, and death.
 Thy nephews' souls bid thee despair and die. (5.5.100-103)

Like the Duchess who wished for her "heavy curse" to tire Richard in battle, not only do the Princes' ghosts disturb Richard's sleep, they will also "be lead within [his] bosom.../ And weigh [him] down" when he fights, ensuring the shameful end that the Duchess's curse called for. It works: when Richard wakes he says that the ghosts that appeared to him in his dreams "Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard / Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers / Armed in proof and led by shallow Richmond" (5.5.171-173). Moreover, like the Duchess whose "prayers on the adverse party fight" (4.4.191) the ghosts, one by one, also deliver messages of blessing and encouragement to

Richmond, assuring that “God and good angels fight on Richmond’s side, / And Richard falls in height of all his pride” (5.5.129-130). Like in the case of Peter and Horner in *Henry VI, Part 2*, God fights on the side of righteous, and ensures their curses have performative power.

In 2 *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, the female characters struggle with the fact that they do not have the masculine authority to act in the political arena or to take active revenge against their enemies. All they can do is curse. Their curses, however, prove to be quite effective, and “in the breath of bitter words” (4.4.133) they combine the elements of feminine lament with masculine action to create a speech act with the power to indirectly cause the downfall of their enemies.

Chapter Two

“Shame Thou to Speake; My Shame Enforceth Me”: Chastity, Consent, and Curses in *The Tragedy of Valentinian* and *All’s Lost by Lust*

She that hath once lost her *Honestie*, should thinke there is nothing left. Take from a maide or woman her beautie, take from her, kindred, riches, comelinesse, eloquence, sharpnesse of wit, cunning in her craft, and give her *Chastitie*, and you have given her all things. And on the other side, give her all these things, and call her whoore, or naughtie packe: with that one word you have taken all from her, and left her bare and foule.

– Robert Cleaver, *A Godly Forme of Household Government* (1603)

Early modern women were advised that “a woman’s only care is [her] chastity” (Vives 47), which could only be maintained through silence and modest behaviour. In the case of rape, however, the female victim was expected to “hue and cry, to the neighbouring townships and there show the injury done her to men of good repute” (Bracton qtd. in Baines, “Effacing Rape”). For the ravished woman, whose chastity is forcibly taken from her in the act of rape, the only way to disprove her complicity in her own sexual assault is through the use of her voice, which, paradoxically, could serve as proof of her lack of chastity. The “ravished” female is therefore caught between the social imperative for silence to preserve her chaste reputation and the legal requirement to report the rape to prove her lack of consent. Neither speaking, nor staying silent will adequately prove her chastity. In William Rowley’s *All’s Lost by Lust* (1622) and John Fletcher’s *The Tragedy of Valentinian* (1614) Jacinta and Lucina engage in a verbal and physical struggle with their attackers, but failing to prevent the rape, they curse their attackers in response to their sexual violation. Although cursing their rapists has the potential to both preserve and damage their appearance of chastity, the curse functions like the “hue and cry” expected of female rape victims. In this way, through their curses,

Jacinta and Lucina are able to show their lack of consent, create a divine witness to their chastity, and participate in the revenge against their attackers.

Cursing and Non-Consent

In the early modern period, the legal definition of rape was beginning to change. The earlier medieval definition saw rape as a property crime, since women were considered the property of their fathers and husbands. Concerned with the theft or damage to the woman as property, medieval rape laws were “designed to redress a wrong committed against a woman’s male relatives” (Burks 765) and were applied equally to abduction, elopement, and any unauthorized extramarital sexual activity (Pallotti 215), regardless of the woman’s consent.¹³ This definition, however, began to change around the middle of the sixteenth century when legal manuals and the 1557 and 1597 statutes began to treat rape and abduction as separate offences. Although rape was technically still described as a property crime, its separation from the crime of abduction meant it began to be treated as more of a sexual offence, which, as Donatella Pallotti explains, meant that a much “greater emphasis [was] now placed on the victim’s consent, on her innocence, morality, resistance and will. Increasing attention [was] paid to the question of proving or disproving consent, on the ‘credibility’ of the victim’s testimony” (217). The burden of proof for all of this, however, rested solely on the victim.¹⁴

¹³ In her description of medieval rape laws in “Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation,” Barbara J. Baines also notes that because rape was conceived as “a crime against property and a threat to the class structure and thus very much ‘between men’ the statutes against rape written in the Middle Ages made little distinction between rape (equated with defloration) on the one hand, and abduction and elopement on the other. Despite the definition of rape in the statutes and compendia, the woman’s will was relatively irrelevant since the enforcement of the laws was clearly designed to protect patriarchal interests” (72).

¹⁴ For more on the effect of the changing rape laws in the early modern period, see Donatella Pallotti “Maps of Woe: Narratives of Rape in Early Modern England, 216-219, and David Nicol “‘My Little What Shall I Call Thee?’: Reinventing the Rape Tragedy in William Rowley’s *All’s Lost By Lust*”, 177. Both Pallotti and Nicol note that the treatment of rape and abduction as separate offences meant that a much greater

It was therefore extremely important for the victim of rape to demonstrate her non-consent both physically and verbally. As Emily Detmer-Goebel argues, “calling out and verbal resistance are considered important markers of the crime of rape, then as now” (145). The victim needed to struggle, resist her attacker, cry for help, and attract witnesses who could at least corroborate her non-consent. As seventeenth-century legal commentator, Matthew Hale suggests, a woman’s claim of rape would rightfully be doubted if she was “in a place near to inhabitants” and no one heard her cries (qtd. in Detmer-Goebel 145). At the rape trial, these witnesses would need to testify on her behalf that they had heard her crying against the attack, or alternatively that for some reason she had been unable to do so. It was only if the victim was in a location where “there was no man to succour her” that she would be exempt from this requirement (Detmer-Goebel 145).

Timely reporting of the rape and continued expression of non-consent was crucial for the charge of rape to be applicable. Even staying silent about the rape would be considered consent after the fact and the sexual act would instead be considered fornication or adultery. As Detmer-Goebel argues in her discussion of Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece*,

If she did not expose the crime, Lucrece’s silence... and non-action would suggest her acceptance of the role as Sextus Tarquin’s mistress, *even if she never sees him again*. The promise of secrecy or discretion reveals the rapist’s desire to reinterpret the rape as a single adulterous event. In turn, Lucrece’s act of telling becomes a refusal of this transformation. She may

emphasis was placed on the woman’s voice, but that this emphasis also meant that the female rape victim bore the burden of proof.

not have the power to stop a rape, but the play suggests that she can successfully defend against consenting to be a “whore.” Just as rape is constructed by a woman’s physical resistance at the scene of rape, these texts also suggest that a rape victim must continue to actively resist the rape even after the rape act itself. (147, emphasis in original)

The victim’s demonstration of non-consent must therefore go beyond merely resisting the rape prior to and during the sexual assault: she must also report the sexual encounter as a rape immediately after in order for her charge to be considered credible. If the rape was redefined as adultery or fornication the blame would shift away from the rapist and onto the victim’s own lack of chastity.

In *All’s Lost by Lust* and *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Jacinta and Lucina’s curses become part of their necessary verbal demonstration of non-consent. In *All’s Lost by Lust*, Jacinta curses her attacker, King Rodericke, before and after her rape. She cries for help, but since there is no one close enough to hear her (2.1.138-139), she resorts to cursing, calling on heaven to either “strike me dead, or throw a vengeance downe” (2.1.142). Following a cry for help that proves to be futile, her curses become an extension of that cry, directed toward the heavens, to prove – at least to God – that she has not consented to the rape. Her final curse before Rodericke drags her offstage represents a last effort to prevent the rape from happening. When Rodericke mocks her curses and other attempts to call for help, Jacinta makes this final curse contingent on the act of rape: “Be cursed in the act, and cursed dye” (2.1.144). If Rodericke rapes her following her curses, and Jacinta knows this is his intention, he will become cursed as a direct consequence of that act and will remain cursed for the rest of his life.

Similar types of contingent curses are often seen in biblical curses, ancient and medieval legal texts, and oaths that contain self-curses. As Kenneth Gross explains, “there is often a certain speculative or promissory character in curse; it creates a ‘potential fact.’ Curse texts often catalog pains that have not yet occurred, losses that have not yet been experienced... Many formal curses, in fact, remain in the subjunctive mood, held in suspension by an ‘if’ or a ‘may’” (167). These curses are meant to prevent the act in question or assure others of the unlikelihood of the oath being broken. In *Richard III*, Richard’s oath to take care of Elizabeth’s daughter contains one such potential self-curse:

Be opposite all planets of good luck,
 To my proceeding – if, with dear heart's love,
 Immaculate devotion, holy thoughts,
 I tender not thy beauteous, princely daughter. (4.4.333-336)

If Richard does not treat Elizabeth’s daughter with devotion and affection, he will be cursed with bad luck at every turn.¹⁵ Here the oath and the curse are performative in that the oath taker’s utterance speaks the oath and curse into being, but the curse is set up as a fail-safe consequence to the oath taker’s failure to uphold his end of the bargain. Once the oath is broken, the curse begins to take effect and the oath taker can say that he is cursed

¹⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers multiple meanings for the verb “tender” that were in use in the early modern period. While in this reading I take “tender” to mean “To treat with affectionate care; to cherish, foster; to take care of, look after” (“tender, v.2” 3d), “tender” could also mean “To have a tender regard for, to hold dear” (3a), which would have very different implications for Richard’s self-curse. Instead of cursing himself only if he does not treat Elizabeth’s daughter with devotion – a self-curse that is contingent on future actions or inaction – using this second definition, Richard also curses himself in the moment of the utterance since he does not actually love her. These two readings, however, are not mutually exclusive, so, in effect, Richard could easily be seen as cursing himself both in the moment of the utterance and contingently, which would take effect if he breaks his oath.

as a result of his original utterance. In this context, Jacinta's curse represents a last effort to get Rodericke to reconsider his actions, and an insurance plan for if he does not.

After the rape, Jacinta does not see Rodericke again, but she continues to struggle with her captor, Lothario. He counsils her to "quiet [her] tongue" (3.1.1), but she cannot keep quiet in this situation: "Quiet my tongue? ... / Worst of humanity, hold thou thy tongue, / Shame thou to speake; my shame enforceth me" (3.1.3, 12-13). To prevent the seriousness of her rape from being effaced due to her supposed consent after the fact, Jacinta must continue speaking out against her sexual violation. Her "shame" – her rape – is what is forcing her to speak: if she wants her sexual violation to be considered rape and to preserve her appearance of chastity, she has to speak. Significantly, Jacinta is also still in considerable danger at this point: she is being held captive by a man who later acknowledges that he has "some hope to taste / This dish after him [Rodericke]" (3.1.62-63) and although unclear, it seems likely, due to her captivity, that Rodericke is not finished with her yet either. Her protests and cries in this context not only serve to show her lack of consent for what has already happened to her, but her continuing lack of consent for any future assault as well.

When Lothario falls asleep, Jacinta has an opportunity to "beat out his braines" (3.1.89), but doing so would close the window of opportunity that would allow her to escape. She weighs her desire for revenge against the need to escape and considers her options:

oh had I a murdering heart,
I could with his office beat out his braines.
But I have better thoughts, these keyes may give me

My release from prison: Can I thinke
 Of better release, no; I will not delay it,
 I will keepe backe my sinnes from multitudes,
 And I may flie for safety to my father (3.1.88-94)

By flying to safety Jacinta hopes to “keepe backe [her] sinnes from multitudes.” These prevented “sinnes” not only include the murder that she has decided not to commit, but also any further sexual assaults that she will avoid by her escape. The way that she describes these “sinnes,” however, is significant. She describes them as “*my sinnes*” that she wants to “keep backe” from becoming “multitudes,” which implies that she believes herself to have committed at least one sin already: the sin of her unauthorized sexual knowledge that was thought to destroy the victim’s chastity, making rape the victim’s sin as well as the rapist’s (Walker 5). By escaping to her father, she will be able to report her rape, and in so doing, she hopes to absolve herself of any complicity in the act that would recast the rape as her own sin. As she exits, with the keys to her escape in hand, she turns a conventional expression of “farewell” into a final curse for her captor and her rapist: “Fare ill, not well, / Thou and thy lustfull Master” (3.1.96-97). By reiterating her lack of consent in the form of a curse as she departs, Jacinta ensures that her decision to spare Lothario cannot be interpreted as a change of heart.

In *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Fletcher employs a slightly different configuration: before the rape Lucina pleads with Valentinian, but she curses him at length after the fact. Before the rape, Lucina frames her sexual assault as a property crime or an offence against her husband’s honour. Pleading with Valentinian, she says, “I beseech your majesty, / Consider what I am, and whose” (2.6.9-10): she is a married

woman, and as such, she belongs to her husband. Although she places the blame on her own beauty for provoking Valentinian (2.6.16-19), she argues that her husband

Has served ye ever truly, fought your battles

As if he daily longed to die for Caesar,

Was never traitor, sir, nor never tainted

In all the actions of his life.

... O let not...

The having of a modest wife decline him;

Let not my virtue be the wedge to break him. (2.6.20-29)

In her attempt to appeal to Valentinian's rationality, Lucina figures her rape as a conflict between the two men: even if she has inadvertently brought Valentinian's attentions on herself, her husband is blameless and does not deserve to have *his* wife stolen from him or have *his* reputation damaged. Ultimately, while her arguments do not work to prevent the rape,¹⁶ they do show her lack of consent. She pleads with him on her knees to consider the consequences of the rape while assuring him that she will not consent to a sexual relationship: "Believe me, I shall never make a whore, sir" (2.6.11).

After the rape she is much more vocal in her condemnation of his actions against her. She curses him at length, calling him "Monster, ravisher, / Thou bitter bane o' th' empire" (3.1.35-36) before launching into a detailed curse summed up in the

¹⁶ Jocelyn Catty notes that in the early modern period, rape was often depicted as a "chastity test" which "in spite of the numerous examples in which women are clearly powerless to prevent their rape, it is generally defined implicitly as woman's failure of eloquence. While giving women a voice, the emphasis also implies that if a woman cannot dissuade a man from rape, her chastity is questionable" (100). Lucina's failure to prevent the rape may have some bearing on the way she conceives of her chastity, or lack thereof, after the rape.

performative, “Vengeance and horror circle thee!” (3.1.43). She goes on to curse him using an allusion to the rape of Lucrece:

The sins of Tarquin be remembered in thee,
 And, where there has a chaste wife been abused,
 Let it be thine: the shame thine, thine the slaughter,
 And, last, forever thine the feared example. (3.1.91-94)

As Jocelyn Catty observes, by using an allusion to a classical story of the rape of a chaste woman, Lucina’s curse defines her experience as rape rather than consensual sex (98); however, we can also see that in this definition, Lucina’s curse plays an important role in her continued demonstration of non-consent after the fact.

In keeping with her conception of rape as a property crime Lucina calls Valentinian a “Glorious thief” (3.1.57) and asks him “What restitution canst thou make to save me?” (3.1.58). He replies, “I’ll ever love and honour you” (3.1.59), presenting her with a choice: she can either stay quiet about the rape and become his mistress, or face the consequences. These consequences, he points out, will be much worse for her than they are for him:

If ye dare,
 Be mine, and only mine, for ye are so precious
 I envy any other should enjoy ye,
 Almost look on ye. And your daring husband
 Shall know he's kept an offering from the empire
 Too holy for his altars. Be the mightiest:
 More than myself I'll make it. If ye will not,

Sit down with this, and silence; for which wisdom
 Ye shall have use of me, and much honour ever,
 And be the same you were. If ye divulge it,
 Know I am far above the faults I do,
 And those I do I am able to forgive too;
 And where your credit in the knowledge of it
 May be with gloss enough suspected, mine
 Is as mine own command shall make it. (3.1.109-123)

Valentinian presents Lucina with three different options: first, she could become his mistress, he would reward her with a position even higher than his own, and, he assures her, her husband will understand. Second, she could keep quiet about the rape altogether. Again, he would reward her, and she would be able to keep her reputation for chastity because the rape would remain a secret. Or third, she could report the rape and her reputation would be ruined, not just because her physical chastity was compromised in the forced sexual act, but also because her “credit in the knowledge of it / May be with gloss enough suspected” (3.1.121-122). Despite her resistance, once the rape becomes general knowledge, others would suspect her chastity and her reputation would be ruined, while Valentinian, as emperor, is as he says, “above the faults I do” (3.1.119). In the first two options, the act of rape is effaced because, as Detmer-Goebel explains in her analysis of Middleton’s *Women Beware Women*, “her consent becomes unimportant in comparison to what happens after the rape. Rather than her words of consent or withholding of consent, [her] silence after the rape defines what has happened to her” (155). Forced or not, the sexual encounter ceases to be rape if, through her silence,

Lucina consents to Valentinian after the fact. Lucina's curse in response to Valentinian's suggestions – "Destruction find thee!" (3.1.134) – shows not only that she refuses to become his mistress, but also that she will not consent to staying silent about the rape.

Valentinian's enumeration of Lucina's options also reveals a contradiction between the social and legal requirements for preserving chastity in the early modern period. The law required the sexual assault to be reported in order for the offence to be considered rape and to absolve the victim of any fault. However, at the same time, as Catty has argued in her analysis of early modern women's writing, "authorship," or in this case, speech "and sexual conduct are problematically interlinked for women by the cultural equation of chastity and obedience with silence, and eloquence or action with promiscuity" (3). Preserving the appearance of chastity after a rape then becomes especially difficult when the only way to prove non-consent is through speech, but in speaking, the female victim appears unchaste, thereby casting doubt on the truth of her story (Ritscher 67). In her examination of early modern rape trials, Garthine Walker explains this difficulty in linguistic terms. She notes that for the female rape victim, "speech about rape was semantically restricted" because "For women, available discourses about sex – sin and whoredom – were confessional and implicatory. Responsibility for sex, and the blame and dishonour that went with it, was feminised in ways that made sexual language an inappropriate medium through which to report a rape" (5). The female rape victim is therefore caught in a double bind: neither speaking, nor staying silent will adequately prove her chastity.

This could explain why neither Jacinta nor Lucina curse when reporting their rape. When the curse is uttered at a "[moment] of violation" (Gross 165), such as before,

during or after a rape, it serves as a strong demonstration of the victim's lack of consent. Outside of that context, however, such unrestrained speech is much less permissible. In the telling of the rape, the maintenance of a performative chaste (and therefore silent) femininity becomes much more important since her credibility as a rape victim is contingent on her appearance of chastity. Cursing, as a performative speech act often associated with anger or witchcraft, is too much outside the requirement for feminine silence to help preserve the rape victim's appearance of chastity at a moment when it becomes so crucial.

The ways in which Jacinta and Lucina report the rape shows the importance that their performative femininity has in the act of telling. In *All's Lost by Lust*, Jacinta takes advantage of the fact that her father does not recognize her at first to tell him of her rape in hypothetical terms before revealing her identity and confirming the identity of her attacker. Significantly, Jacinta does not speak until her father asks her to: "Hast not a tongue to reade thy sorrowes out?" (4.1.46).¹⁷ When she does speak, she only hints at the identity of her attacker, answering her father's questions with vague answers that point to Rodericke without accusing him directly. For example, Jacinta knows that, in his loyalty to his king, Julianus is unable to accept the idea that Rodericke could be responsible: he believes "king Rodericke; [is] all goodnessse. / He cannot wrong thy father" (4.1.50-51), but she replies by asking, "What was Tarquin?" (4.1.52). Through her allusion to the classical precedent set in the story of Lucrece, Jacinta forces her father to realize that kings are capable of rape. In setting Rodericke up as a Tarquin figure, she also places

¹⁷ Although at this point Julianus does not know what has happened to the young woman before him, this line also recalls the figures of Philomela and Shakespeare's Lavinia whose attackers cut out their tongues following their rapes, suggesting that he might be able to guess at the content of what she is about to tell him. This line also seems to foreshadow the later scene where Mullymumen cuts out Jacinta's tongue after she refuses to marry him.

herself in the role of Lucrece – a woman who has been ravished, but whose soul is still pure as evidenced by her suicide – an example Jacinta says she would have followed “had she done her part” (4.1.99).¹⁸ By setting it up in these terms, Jacinta and her father now have a way of talking about the act of sexual violation without needing to delve into graphic, and therefore unchaste, detail.

Through this allusion, her father is able to understand that she did not consent without her having to explain beyond hypothetical and metaphorical terms:

Say your Jacinta then (chast as the Rose)
 Comming on sweetly in the springing bud,
 And ne're felt heat, to spread the Sommer sweet:
 But to increase and multiply it more,
 Did to it selfe keepe in its own perfume:
 Say that some rapine hand had pluckt the bloome,
 Jacinta like that flower, and ravisht her,
 Defiling her white lawne of chastity,
 With ugly blacks of lust; what would you do? (4.1.67-75)

Jacinta's hypothetical question is designed to get a truthful response based on fatherly duty and affection and to allow herself to talk about her own sexual violation without incurring her father's judgement. While the rape of his daughter exists only in the realm of the hypothetical, Julianus can talk about his “love, and fatherhood, and grieffe, / And rage, and many passions,... [that] must all / Beget a thing call'd vengeance” (4.1.79-81)

¹⁸ Although Jacinta places herself in the role of Lucrece – she is chaste despite having been ravished – she also acknowledges her deviation from that role in that she has not “done her part” by committing suicide as seems to be expected. For Jacinta, however, not committing suicide does not mean that she does not believe herself to be as chaste as the suicidal Lucrece.

without those emotions clouding his response and preventing him from listening to what she has to say. Incrementally, Jacinta presses Julianus to detail how her ravishment would affect his relationship with her attacker even if he “carried / The fairest seeming face of friendship to your selfe” (4.1.82-83). Knowing her father’s unwavering loyalty to the king, she wants to know that Julianus will believe her when she tells him who her attacker is. She cannot risk her father’s doubt on the issue because if he doubts that she is telling the truth about the identity of her attacker, he will doubt the truth of the rape itself, and the status of her perceived mental chastity would be jeopardized.

Jacinta’s behaviour throughout the scene also speaks to this “inner” chastity. She arrives onstage with a “down-cast looke” (4.1.43) after reports that she has been crying (4.1.32) and kneels in front of her father in hopes that

Such a resemblance of a daughters duty,
Will make you mindfull of a fathers love:
For such my injuries must exact from you,
As you would for your owne. (4.1.62-65)

Jacinta kneels to show honour to him as a dutiful daughter, a supplicating gesture that emphasizes her feminine, chaste behaviour and will also make him more likely to take pity on her and believe her story as truth. Indeed these feminine gestures do influence Julianus’s wiliness to listen to her story, as he acknowledges that “the down-cast looke, calls up compassion in me / A Course going to the grave looks not more deadly” (4.1.43-44). In the end, her approach is effective: Jacinta is able to preserve her appearance of inner chastity in the act of telling her rape through her performative feminine behaviour that includes the indirect language of metaphor and allusion. Instead of telling him

directly, she leads her father to the point where he has no choice but to understand “Rodericke [as] a Tarquin” (4.1.98) because he can “reade a Tragicke story” “in [her] sullied eyes” (4.1.104, 103) and know that she is telling the truth.

In *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Lucina is able to maintain a chaste silence even further than Jacinta. In fact, Lucina does not even seem to need to tell her husband Maximus about the rape because he already knows by her tears and the ring that led her to court (3.1.151-153). He realizes

O my best friend, I am ruined. Go, Lucina,
 Already in thy tears I have read thy wrongs,
 Already found a Caesar. Go, thou lily,
 Thou sweetly drooping flower. Go, silver swan,
 And sing thine own sad requiem. Go, Lucina,
 And if thou dar'st, outlive this wrong. (3.1.156-161)

In her silent, feminine tears Maximus is able to discern what has happened to her, thereby preventing the necessity of Lucina having to actually report the rape and compromise her appearance of chastity in the process. Instead, Lucina's silence seems to have the opposite effect: Maximus's description of her as a “lily, / Thou sweetly drooping flower” highlights her innocence and feminine purity, as well as her sexual violation,¹⁹ without her having to say a word. In fact, Lucina has only three lines consisting of eleven words in total in her actual reporting of the rape before she intends to slip away and kill herself. Maximus is the one who does the talking.

¹⁹ As a “sweetly drooping flower” the lily is wilting, which could indicate both the peculiar (mentally) chaste but (physically) unchaste status of the rape victim and the suicide that was expected of her following the rape. Maximus's inclusion of the adverb “sweetly”, however, also seems to acknowledge that none of this was Lucina's fault.

In both plays, the reporting of the rape is successful (in that it does not damage the appearance of the victim's mental chastity) when the males are able to "read" the truth in the bodies of the women. Although, as Catty argues, because the female body cannot be a stable signifier for her past sexual conduct, these images of reading suggest "a profound anxiety about the *unknowability* of women" (110), both Jacinta and Lucina are able to navigate this cultural anxiety through the way in which they present themselves when reporting the rape. Rather than accusing their rapist directly, both Jacinta and Lucina speak or present themselves in a way that leads the men to make that discovery. If they were to curse their attackers in the reporting of the rape, they would risk a lack of sympathy and undermine their own case because their speech would instead be read as indicative of a lack of chastity.

The difficulty with preserving a chaste reputation after a rape is that, as Catty suggests, in the early modern period chastity had two competing definitions as both a mental and a physical attribute:

Chastity is frequently presented as an ideologically informed state of mind; a 'chaste' woman is one who chooses to live by its principles, preserving her virginity or remaining faithful to her husband. Yet the forcefulness of arguments for an opposition between mind or soul and body following rape, perhaps paradoxically, would seem to confirm that the basic definition of chastity is as a physical state. Rape, after all, tends to be seen as a *pollution* of the female body, regardless of the victim's volition, as is shown in the assertion by Lucrece's friends that 'her bodie was polluted, and not her mynde.' (15)

In the act of rape, the victim's physical chastity was thought to be irreparably lost, even though her lack of consent to the sexual act meant that her mind was still technically chaste in the sense that, even though she was raped, she did not compromise her own values and beliefs about the importance of virginity or sexual fidelity. For the victim of rape, attempting to preserve her chaste reputation meant that she needed to emphasize the difference between these two competing definitions: separating her mental chastity – her ideologically chaste state of mind – from her physical chastity that was forcibly taken from her in the act of rape. Separating the pure mind from the defiled body was almost impossible, however, as the rape victim was inevitably left with illicit sexual *knowledge*, no matter how incontrovertible her lack of consent. Physical chastity, on the other hand, remained much easier to measure and had a vast importance for patriarchal social relations because, as Nicol suggests, despite a woman's mental chastity, if she was physically unchaste she was considered to be unsuitable for marriage since the legitimacy of her offspring could be questioned (175). As Lothario notes while taunting Jactinta, "it is now doubtfull what thou art; being neither / Maide, wife, nor... widow" (3.1.15-16), her forced sexual experience precludes her from any of the acceptable roles available for women in early modern society, and therefore "paradoxically, her lack of consent means that she is at once a chaste woman and a whore" (Nicol 175).

In early modern rape tragedies the victim's suicide is often presented as the only solution to "the paradox of her social status" (Nicol 176), as her self-destruction of her unchaste body represents the ultimate proof of her lack of consent. Although Lucina's death in *The Tragedy of Valentinian* seems to be a spontaneous reaction to her loss of reputation rather than a suicide, as Eileen Allman notes, Lucina is resolved to die by her

own hand if necessary even before her husband suggests it (122). She assures Maximus and Aëtius that

The tongues of angels cannot alter me;
 For could the world again restore my credit
 As fair and absolute as first I bred it,
 That world I should not trust again. The empire
 By my life can get nothing but my story,
 Which, whilst I breathe, must be but his abuses. (3.1.247-252)

It is Lucina's commitment to her chaste reputation that necessitates her death. She knows that not only will her reputation never be "as fair and absolute as first [she] bred it," but if she were to survive her rape, her "story" would always be doubted and would necessitate her constant reiteration of her lack of consent to "his abuses."²⁰ For Lucina, suicide is the only way to maintain her reputation socially, but it seems to also be understood that God knows that her mind is chaste even though her body is polluted.

Cursing and Divine Witnesses

By cursing her attacker before or after the rape, the female victim is able to call on God to be a divine witness to her chastity. Even though her body is or will be violated and forcibly made "unchaste," God could witness the chaste soul of the victim. In this way, the female victim's curse represents an attempted substitution for the legal

²⁰ In *All's Lost by Lust*, Jacinta is able to survive her rape, but acknowledges that "(had she done her part) / [she] Should be the second Lucrece" (4.1.99-100). This is due in large part to her father's acceptance of her after the rape in spite of her "forced stain of lust" (4.1.134). Jacinta is also both more vocal about her non-consent and less concerned about her social reputation than Lucina is in *The Tragedy of Valentinian*. Karen Bamford has argued, however, that Jacinta's failure to commit suicide and her vocal denunciation of the rape would have made her less sympathetic to an early modern audience as she would have failed to adequately prove her chastity (106-107).

requirement for human witnesses to corroborate her non-consent.²¹ Before her rape, Jacinta turns to curses when she realizes “thers none within [her] call” to hear her cries (2.1.139). She assures Rodericke that “Heaven heares” (2.1.140) and her curse directs heaven to observe the situation: “See heaven, a wicked king, lust staynes his Crowne” (2.1.141). Rather than accepting the blame for the situation herself, she asks heaven to witness that Rodericke is “a wicked king” and that it is his lust, not any lack of chastity on her part that has caused the assault. After the rape, Jacinta again directs her “exclames” to heaven as a divine witness to her lack of consent – “I’le waken heaven and earth with my exclames” (3.1.5) – indicating that her cries and curses are meant not only for earthly witnesses but for divine ones as well. Later she places her curses within the realm of these exclams: “alone I’le tell / My sorrowes unto heaven, my curse to hell” (3.1.56-57).

Lucina also calls on the gods to be witnesses to her chastity both before and after her rape. Before the rape Lucina instructs Valentinian to “Look upon me, / And if ye be so cruel to abuse me, / Think how the gods will take it” (2.6.14-16). Here she warns that the gods are watching and will be angered if he abuses her. After the rape, she invokes the power of the gods in her curse: “The gods will find thee – / That’s all my refuge now – for they are righteous” (3.1.41-42). She takes comfort in the idea that the gods will lend their divine power to her curses. Finally, she calls on the gods to witness what Valentinian’s rape has done to her:

Gods, what a wretched thing has this man made me!

For I am now no wife for Maximus,

²¹ Legally, of course, the curse would not help to actually meet the requirements for witnesses unless someone (other than God) were close enough to hear her curses and recognize them as part of her struggle against her attacker.

No company for women that are virtuous.

No family I now can claim, nor country,

Nor name, but 'Caesar's whore'. (3.1.73-77)

Although she believes her body is now polluted by the rape, she calls on the gods to witness that the blame for this is Valentinian's, not hers. He is the reason she is now socially disconnected from her husband, family, and community. As Karen Bamford notes, without any socially acceptable role within the patriarchal order, "the raped woman is a pariah": Jacinta is branded as "Caesar's whore" by virtue of her sexual violation and "failure to preserve her socially approved identity" (158). However, it is also important to note that the gods here serve as witnesses to her innocence even though her physical chastity was taken from her.

Cursing and Revenge

Not only do the gods stand in as witnesses to the rape, but they also take action. In the early modern period it was conventionally believed that God could hear people's curses. In fact, as Keith Thomas notes, "although post-Reformation Protestants usually denied both the propriety and the efficacy of ritual cursing, they frequently believed that, if the injury which provoked the curse were heinous enough, the Almighty would lend it his endorsement" (507). As a speech act, the curse functions in accordance with this "accepted conventional procedure [which has] a certain conventional effect" (Austin 14-15). Jacinta and Lucina's curses then, which follow from their sexual violation, are able to draw on divine power for their efficacy, allowing the female victim to participate in the revenge against her attacker – a typically masculine endeavour – through the performative power of her curse.

In most revenge tragedies, revenge is an exclusively male enterprise. As Detmer-Goebel suggests, “while violent and revengeful women are imaginable and representable on the Renaissance stage... rape victims themselves are not imagined as using deadly force to enact revenge” (149). In *All’s Lost by Lust*, Jacinta reports the rape to her father, but it is Julianus who takes revenge:

But Spaine has now begun a civill warre,
 And to confound me onely: see you my daughter?
 She sounds the Trumpet, which draws forth my sword
 To be revenged. (4.1.106-109)

Julianus frames his revenge as a civil war that Rodericke has started with his actions. Like war, revenge here is a conflict between men: Jacinta has merely sounded the trumpet that will spur the men to action. Furthermore, as the other men rally to support him, there is no indication that Jacinta plans to fight along side her father on her own behalf. In fact, she highlights a distinction between how the genders should deal with their grief:

Deare Father,
 Recollect your noble spirits, conquer grieffe,
 The manly way: you have brave foes subdued,
 Then let no female passions thus orewhelme you. (5.1.135-138)

She counsils her father to deal with his grief in the manly way – through revenge – rather than the feminine way – through tears. Although Jacinta does not explicitly say that revenge is a masculine enterprise, she does advise him to “conquer grieffe” the same way

he has “brave foes subdued” which associates fighting his enemies with the way to conquer this “griefe.”

When Julianus explains to his men why he is now “a vowd foe to your King, to Rodorique” (5.1.155), he frames the rape according to its definition as a property crime that has resulted in *his* damaged property: “Behold this child of mine, this onely mine, / I had a daughter, but she is ravisht now” (5.1.168-169). As his child, Jacinta belongs to him, but in speaking about her as his “daughter” – a commodity on the marriage market “that might be bought and sold in arranged marriages so as to perpetuate family names, form political alliances and consolidate or augment wealth” (Brown and McBride 16) – Julianus switches to the past tense. In terms of marriageability, Jacinta’s ravishment means that she no longer has much, if any, marketable value: what good is a daughter whose virtue is spoiled and cannot attract an advantageous match?²² As expected, Julianus’s men respond immediately with their support, as this is reason enough for them to get behind him in his quest for vengeance.

Similarly, in *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Lucina’s death ensures that the revenge for her rape is, by definition, exclusively masculine. After her rape, Lucina lives long enough to tell her husband what has happened to her and spur him to revenge on her behalf, but her spontaneous death as a result of the loss of her chaste reputation quite

²²Interestingly, shortly after Julianus acknowledges his daughter’s “ravisht” status, Mullymumen offers to marry her as a show of loyalty in Julianus’s quest for revenge: “to bind me faster to thee, / Plight me thy ravisht daughter to my wife, / And thou shalt see my indignation fly / On wings of Thunder” (4.1.180-183). Although Jacinta’s ravishment does not seem to dissuade Mullymumen from wanting to marry her, by describing her as Julianus’s “ravisht daughter” and framing the marriage as a way “to bind me faster to thee”, he highlights the diminished value of what he requests in what he sees as a contract between men to ensure loyalty. Julianus’s response – “Ile not compel her heart, woee, win, and wed her: / Forc’t she has been too much” (4.1.185-186) – suggests that he does not see the marriage contract as something to be settled only between men, but may also be a way for him to avoid forcing Jacinta into a marriage with Mullymumen who, as a Moor, despite his status as a king, would not represent the kind of advantageous match that Julianus would have envisioned for his daughter.

obviously takes her out of the equation when it comes to participating in her own revenge. Critics have previously remarked that despite the lengthy debate over the efficacy of Lucina's suicide, it is clear that committing suicide is the decision that her husband expects her to make (Catty 106; McMullan 171-172). However, even Aëtius, who counsels against suicide so that she may live at least another year longer (3.1.207-208), does not seem to expect or want her to participate in revenge against her attacker. Instead he assures her that he will help to seek justice on her behalf: "the... sword I wear for you, where justice wills me, / ... 'tis no dull one" (3.1.204-206).

Maximus also views his wife's rape as an issue between men. When he explains to Aëtius what has happened, Maximus frames Lucina's rape as a slight against himself:

'T has pleased the Emperor, my noble master,
 For all *my* services and dangers for him,
 To make *me* mine own pander. Was this justice?

O my Aëtius, have *I* lived to bear this? (3.1.164-167, emphasis mine)

As Maximus sees it, Valentinian has repaid his loyalty by making him complicit in his wife's forcible seduction: Lucina's experience and consent do not seem to factor into this offence. Furthermore, as Bamford suggests, what later spurs Maximus to action is not the need to avenge his wife's sexual violation, but how other men will view him differently if he does not (103):

Shall not men's tongues
 Dispute it afterward, and say I gave
 (Affecting dull obedience and tame duty,
 And led away with fondness of a friendship)

The only virtue of the world to slander? (3.3.42-46)

If he does not follow through with his revenge, not only might Lucina's chastity be disputed after the fact, but other men would also question his masculine resolve or insinuate he was complicit in giving his wife to the emperor from the start. It is striving to protect his own reputation that spurs Maximus to action even more than the sexual violation of his wife, making this a revenge more for his own wrongs than hers.²³

Through their curses, however, both Lucina and Jacinta are able to participate more actively in their own revenge. As a performative utterance, the uttering of the curse performs the action it describes, creating the cursed condition in the cursed subject (Austin 6); therefore, "in saying these words", the cursing female characters can be understood to be "*doing something*" (Austin 13, italics in original). Cursing, either before or after the rape, therefore allows the female victim to enact a revenge that may not be instantaneous, but will take effect even after her death. Indeed, both Lucina and Jacinta's curses are effective because the words spoken in the performative context of the curse correspond to later events. In *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Lucina curses Valentinian at length, detailing the events that will happen as a result of her curse:

The gods will find thee –
 That's all my refuge now – for they are righteous.
 Vengeance and horror circle thee! The empire,
 In which thou liv'st a strong, continued surfeit,
 Like poison will disgorge thee; good men raze thee

²³ See Barbara J. Baines, *Representing Rape in the English Early Modern Period* 12-13, and Marina Hila "'Justice Shall Never Hear Ye, I am Justice': Absolutist Rape and Cyclical History in John Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian*" 748-753 for a discussion of how Maximus's revenge later evolves into his own tyranny and causes him to reinterpret Lucina's rape to align with his political ambition.

For ever being read again but vicious;
 Women and fearful maids make vows against thee.
 Thy own slaves, if they hear of this, shall hate thee,
 And those thou hast corrupted first fall from thee,
 And, if thou let'st me live, the soldier,
 Tired with thy tyrannies, break through obedience
 And shake his strong steel at thee. (3.1.41-52)

Although Lucina is dead by the end of this same scene, her curse continues to be effective even beyond her death as each event predicted in the curse comes true. Not only does the empire “disgorge” Valentinian “like poison” when Aretus literally poisons him (5.2.69), but the audience later also finds out that the army that Valentinian has let fall into disuse has risen up against him (5.2.157), his own men wish that they “had never known [his] lusts” (5.2.161), and even “the women of the town have murdered /... Caesar’s she-bawds” (5.2.158-159). Just prior to his death, Valentinian also seems to recognize that Lucina’s curse is taking effect. He calls out Lucina’s name and, shortly after, confesses to the same gods on whom Lucina had called to give her curses power:

Gods,
 Gods, let me ask ye what I am. Ye lay
 All your inflictions on me; hear me, hear me!
 I do confess I am a ravisher,
 A murderer, a hated Caesar. (5.2.113-117)

Here he calls on the gods to witness his confession to Lucina’s rape, recognizing that “The gods have found [his] sins” (5.2.95), and the poison is part of the “inflictions” that

the gods are laying upon him. His own deeds have come back to haunt him, which is exactly the content of Lucina's curse.

Jacinta's curses on Rodericke are much less specific, but equally effective in allowing her to participate in her own revenge. The purpose of her curse is to "throw a vengeance down" (2.1.142), which she reiterates when she tells Lothario,

I'll waken heaven and earth with my exclames,
 Astonish hell for feare, the fire be doubled
 In the due vengeance of my hainous wrong,
 My heavy hainous wrong. (3.1.5-8)

Jacinta makes it clear that she intends her curses to serve as vengeance for the wrongs enacted against her. Her curse on Rodericke is simple, but performatively powerful: once Rodericke activates the contingent curse by ravishing her, he becomes, as she foretells, "cursed in the act", and later it becomes clear that "cursed [he will] dye" (2.1.144). When Julianus's army is on its way to take revenge, Jacinta's curses finally seem to take effect: Rodericke admits,

theres within my bosome
 An Army of Furies mustred, worse than those
 Which follow Julianus: Conscience beats
 The Drum of horror up. (5.1.10-13)

Rodericke is being tormented by an army of Furies – the personification of curses²⁴ pronounced by the victims of the offender's crimes – which to him are even more terrifying than the flesh and blood army that is on its way to enact their vengeance. His

²⁴ Kenneth Gross calls revenging Furies "curses personified" and notes that some classical revengers even claim to be Furies: "Aeschylus's Clytemnestra, for example... takes on the mask of a curse Fury to justify her murder of Agamemnon" (166).

conscience marches along with the Army of Furies in their torment, which seems to further manifest itself in the apparitions he sees when he opens the enchanted castle's "fatall chamber" (5.2.1). The apparitions of Jacinta, Julianus, the Moor, Antonio, Alonzo and himself terrify him and he asks, "What Magick bindes me? What furies hold mine arme?" (5.2.24) before he calls for help. Here Rodericke seems to associate the "Army of Furies" with Jacinta, whom he calls "that she-curse" (5.2.18), and recognizes the Furies' torment as her curse beginning to take effect. Even though Rodericke escapes to Biscany (5.4.22), by the end of the play, it is clear that he will die – still cursed – when Mullymumen's men catch up with him (5.5.201-202).

For both Jacinta and Lucina, curses function as part of the expression of their lack of consent to their ravishment. Caught between the necessity for chaste silence and the legal requirement to report the rape, their curses have the potential to undermine their appearance of chastity. However, as a spontaneous reaction to their sexual violation, Jacinta and Lucina's curses enable them to navigate these contradictory social constraints by demonstrating their non-consent – at least to God and to the audience – and allow them to participate in bringing their attackers to (divine) justice.

Chapter Three

“Ho! Have I Found Thee Cursing?”: Social Disruption and Unruly

Speech in *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches*

Deare Christians, lay this to heart, namely the cause, and first time, that the Divell came unto her, then, even then when she was cursing, swearing, and blaspheming... For heere you may see the fruites thereof, that it is a playne way to bring you to the Divell; nay that it brings the Divell to you: for it seemed that when shee so fearefully did sweare, her oathes did so conjure him, that hee must leave then his mansion place, and come at this wretches commande and will, which was by her imprecations.

– Henry Goodcole, *The Wonderfull Discovery of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch Late of Edmonton* (1621)

Early modern beliefs in witchcraft stem from the idea that “certain people in certain circumstances had the power to harm others” by invoking unseen, supernatural forces through the power of their words (Culpeper and Semino 100). As social historians commonly note, accused witches were often poor, elderly women, whose unruly speech made them a source of social disruption within the community. Through her curses, spells, charms, and incantations, the witch was thought to be able to transform her surroundings, enact revenge on her enemies and disrupt, with the devil’s help, the existing gendered, economic and social hierarchies within the early modern community. Both Rowley, Dekker, and Ford’s *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621) and Brome and Heywood’s *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1634) depict fictionalized accounts of contemporary witch trials, capitalizing on the fascination with the witch’s supernatural power to explore the witch’s potential for social disruption. In these plays, the witches’ language represents a rejection of idealized gender norms in favour of characteristics that are disparagingly gendered as feminine. These characteristics, combined with her supernatural power, grant the witch a measure of social agency, albeit only temporarily.

The witch's power is no match for the legitimate authority of the lawful magistrate, and in the end, the plays become a warning against the lure of witchcraft and the dangers of unruly female speech.

Performative Language and Witchcraft

Performative language, or the ability to perform an action with words, is an important aspect of the definition of witchcraft. Curses are the most obvious example of this: as performative utterances they call on unseen supernatural forces – good or evil – to give their words their intended effect, and in speaking those words, the speaker actually creates the cursed condition in the cursed subject. Although cursing, or malediction, would seem to be an important part of the witch's repertoire of supernatural performative language, surprisingly few witches utter curses in early modern dramatic representations. In Rowley, Dekker, and Ford's sympathetic portrayal of the real-life witch Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Sawyer is one of the few early modern witch characters that actually curse onstage, whereas in many other witchcraft plays, as is the case in Heywood and Brome's *The Late Lancashire Witches*, very few of the witches' performative speech acts come close to the linguistic formula of the typical curse,²⁵ even though they have the same or similar performative effects. For example, in Meg's rhymed verse,

Now, upon the churl's ground

On which we're met, let's dance a round,

²⁵ Interestingly, the non-witch characters in *The Late Lancashire Witches* actually utter curses with a far greater frequency than the actual witches, but although their curses are recognizable as such – “A pox upon your tail!” (4.1.26) – they do not seem to have any actual effect other than to express the speaker's frustration or futility. These curses, therefore, seem to fall into the category that J.L. Austin terms “unhappy” performatives, most likely because, as non-witches, these characters do not have the supernatural authority to use their words performatively in this way.

That cockle, darnell, poppia wild

May choke his grain and fill the field (2.1.16-19)

the last line is somewhat curse-like, in that it will performatively ensure that the victim's grain is choked by weeds, but it is not quite a curse because it does not follow the same linguistic construction as typical curses like Elizabeth Sawyer's "Vengeance, shame, ruin light upon that canker!" (Rowley, Dekker and Ford 2.1.120). It is still a supernatural performative speech act, but the rhythmic, rhyming couplets indicate that it is a charm or spell²⁶ rather than a curse. The effect, however, is the same: as Geoffrey Hughes explains, curses, charms and spells all come from a belief in "word magic" – "the belief that words, especially when used ritualistically or in some form of incantation, have the power to unlock mysterious powers in nature and to affect human beings and their relationships" (512). Therefore, in order to study performative language in the context of witchcraft, it is important to examine curses without excluding the various other forms of supernatural performative language that do not fall into that narrow category.

Kirilka Stavreva uses the term "witch-speak" to describe this "host of verbal formulas in the arsenal of bewitchment techniques" in which she includes curses, formal imprecations, charms, spells, and "endlessly variable disturbances of signification, equivocations, moans, giggles, and incantations of intangible shape but unmistakably material effect" (312, 310). She argues that

²⁶ In his *Encyclopedia of Swearing*, Geoffrey Hughes notes that "instructions for ancient charms frequently specify that the form of words must be sung, usually many times and commonly with some ritual action" (66), and that spells similarly involved the use of verse (447). Although Hughes also notes that originally *charm* had a positive meaning as "the opposite of a spell or curse", it was later also associated with witchcraft and heretical practices (67); it is this more malignant meaning that Heywood and Brome invoke in their stage direction "*Witches charm together*" (5.5.152.1) and their frequent use of the word charm in relation to the witches' performative language in *The Late Lancashire Witches*.

Like song, witch-speak derived much of its force not from the word itself, but from the manner of its utterance. Like song, it is an instance of intensified language, the kind of language that has, quite literally, more body. As Butler has made clear, the performative force of injurious speech is largely a bodily force, the kind of force which confounds the sociolinguistic norms by which speech is regulated. Injurious witch-speak in particular intensified stylistic figuration with the incantatory impact of howlings, mumblings, "glowing eyes," and the suggestion of sinister rituals. (314-315)

In witchcraft, it is not just curses that are performative: the witch's spells, incantations, and charms also derive a performative force from their linguistic construction even though they do not use the explicit performative form that J.L. Austin describes.²⁷ Witch-speak is performative because "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something" (Austin 6-7). Though the charm or spell may take any variety of forms, in effect it performs the action of bewitching someone or something through the act of speaking.

²⁷ J.L. Austin distinguishes explicit performatives as "highly developed affairs" that "begin with or include some highly significant and unambiguous expression such as 'I bet', 'I promise', 'I bequeath' – an expression very commonly also used in naming the act which, in making such an utterance, I am performing" (32). Naming the act within the utterance makes it clear which act is being performed, but as Austin explains, "it is both obvious and important that we can on occasion use the utterance 'go' to achieve practically the same as we achieve by the utterance 'I order you to go': and we should say cheerfully in either case, describing subsequently what someone did, that he ordered me to go. It may, however, be uncertain in fact, and, so far as the mere utterance is concerned, is always left uncertain when we use so inexplicit a formula as the mere imperative 'go', whether the utterer is ordering (or is purporting to order) me to go or merely advising, entreating, or what not me to go" (32-33). Here Austin shows that both the explicit and inexplicit formulas perform the same performative function, but in the case of the inexplicit performative, it becomes more difficult not only to pinpoint the specific act that is being performed in the utterance, but also to decide, by examining the circumstances, "whether or not the utterance is performative at all" (33).

One of the major defining characteristics of witchcraft is this demonically-backed, performative witch-speak. The 1604 “Act concerning Conjurat[i]on, Witchcraft and dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits” (1 JAS. I, C. 12.) states that “if any person or persons ... shall use, practice, or exercise any invocation or conjuration of an evil and wicked spirit: or shall consult, covenant with, entertaine, imploy, feed or reward any evil and wicked spirit, to or for any intent or purpose; ... or shall use, practice, or exercise, any *Witchcraft, Inchantment, Charme or Sorcery*” (238), they would be guilty of an offence punishable by a prison sentence or death, depending on the severity of the crime.²⁸ Significantly, the individual actions defined as part of the illegal act of witchcraft include “invocation,” “conjuration,” “consult... with,” “covenant with,” “Inchantment,” and “Charme,” which are specifically speech acts – actions where “the uttering of a sentence is, or a part of, the doing of [the] action” (Austin 5). Witchcraft, then, according to the legal definition, predominantly consists of speech acts which derive their performative force from the supernatural “invocation or conjuration of an evil or wicked spirit” or a “covenant” with the devil (“The Witchcraft Act of 1604” 238).

As Eric Byville suggests in his article “How to Do Witchcraft Tragedy with Speech Acts” this “covenant” or contract, is performative as well. In his comparison of Marlow’s *Doctor Faustus* (1588-89) and *The Witch of Edmonton* he notes that “the speech act that defines and empowers both of these tragic witches is a supernatural

²⁸ A witch would be sentenced to “suffer paines of death as a Felon or Felons, and ... lose the priviledge and benefit of Clergy and Sanctuary” (“The Witchcraft Act” 238) if the witchcraft, enchantment or charm killed or harmed someone. If, however, the charms or enchantments were unsuccessful or directed toward actions such as finding lost items, “provoke[ing] an unlawfull love”, or destroying “Cattell or Goods” the convicted witch would instead be sentenced to “suffer imprisonment by the space of one whole year, without baile or maineprise; and once in every quarter of the said year, shall in some Market-Town, upon the Market day, or at such a time as any faire shall be kept there, stand openly upon the Pillory by the space of 6 hours, and there shall openly confesse his or her error and offence” (239). A further distinction notes that repeat offenders would receive the death penalty upon their second witchcraft conviction (239).

performative bequeathing their souls to the devil” and it is this “performative that changes these characters’ relationship to supernatural powers, determining their exceptional status and their tragic fate” (17). The words and corresponding actions are what create the contract and officially transform Elizabeth Sawyer into a witch. Prior to the contract, she may have been suspected or even accused of being a witch, but she could plausibly deny that she belonged in that category. However, after the performative utterance, “I am thine... All thine” (2.1.144-146) she has accepted and transformed her identity from *suspected* to *actual* witch. It is also important to note, however, that along with her change in status, it is also this contract with the devil that gives the witch’s words their performative force. This demonic contract ensures that Mother Sawyer qualifies as, in Austin’s terms, a person who is “appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked,” in this case, the effective utterance of performative witch-speak (Austin 15).

In both *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches* witch-speak can be seen to be performative. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Dog is the explicit manifestation of the performative power of Sawyer’s curses. Although the representation of Dog onstage seems to disconnect Sawyer’s curses from their supernatural effects, because the majority of the other characters in the play cannot see Dog when he is performing Sawyer’s wishes, he can be read as an explicit reminder to the audience of the diabolical source of her curses’ performative power. Her commands directed toward him can therefore be interpreted as witch-speak. Although the majority of Sawyer’s witch-speak does not conform to Austin’s explicit performative construction, when Sawyer commands Dog – a supernatural being – to “work on [Old Banks’s] corn and cattle”

(2.1.166) and he obeys, the playwrights show that her words have the power to literally command supernatural forces.²⁹ In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the performative effect of witch-speak is equally evident though these effects are staged differently.³⁰ Moll commands her milk-pail by simply stating “it shall come to me” (2.6.45) or giving it direction – “Pail, on afore to the field and stay till I come” (2.6.65-66) – before the pail moves, seemingly of its own accord, to follow her wishes.³¹ Later, the witches conjure their feast with a combination of words, pulling on ropes, and the aid of their familiars,³² but each new addition to the feast is called forth using witch-speak, usually signified by rhyming couplets: “Pull for the poultry, fowl, and fish, / For empty shall not be a dish”; “This meat is tedious; now some fairy / Fetch what belongs unto the dairy” (4.1.66-67, 70-71). As Charlotte A. Coffin notes, “the text... reveals a careful negotiation between the exploitation of available resources and constant supplementation through speeches” as the playwrights cleverly make use of the resources of the commercial stage (107). While Coffin argues that the staging of witchcraft in this way draws parallels between witchcraft and the theatre, highlighting the artifice of both (103-105), I would also argue that here the staging of the witches’ magical abilities also emphasizes the performativity of witch-speak within the play itself, as even those transformations that take place (or are

²⁹ Rowley, Dekker and Ford’s portrayal of Elizabeth Sawyer and her contract with the demon Dog suggests that they saw this power as a product of the demonic contract rather than the witch’s innate magical power. However, although the origin of the witch’s power seems to have been a matter of some debate, as Eric Byville argues, “neither side of this ‘split,’ ... denies the efficacy of supernatural performatives: those who demystify magical charms simply *reinvest* this power in another performative utterance—the demonic pact itself” (10). I would also argue that the effect is still the same: the witches’ words have the performative power to control or command supernatural forces, at least while the terms of the demonic contract are still in effect.

³⁰ See Charlotte A. Coffin, “Theatre and/as Witchcraft: A Reading of *The Late Lancashire Witches*” for a discussion of the staging of the witchcraft scenes.

³¹ Coffin notes that the milk pail that moves itself is “a trick easily performed with string or wire” (108).

³² In his letter of August 16, 1634, Nathaniel Tomkyns describes various aspects of the production of *The Late Lancashire Witches* he saw at the Globe. He describes the witches’ feasts as “their banqueting with all sorts of meat and drinke conveyed unto them by their familiars upon the pulling of a cord” (qtd. Findlay 149).

reported) onstage, seemingly not accompanied by an audible spell, take place on cue, signified by a word or phrase from the witch: “Strike! (*Music [plays]*) Enter [*a spirit like a pedant dancing to the music. The strain done, he points at BANTAM and looks full in his face*]” (4.5.32). Whether it is in the form of a pail that moves on its own or familiars who appear on cue, the spectacle of magic onstage has the effect of reproducing the other-worldly and unnatural quality of “real” witchcraft for the audience, whose enjoyment of any theatrical fiction requires a certain amount of imagination and suspension of disbelief.

Witch-Speak and the Rejection of Idealized Femininity

Presented as unnatural in its connection to demonic forces, supernatural witch-speak also has a major impact on the performative identity of the witches, signifying a movement away from an adherence to the norms of idealized feminine behaviour in favour of characteristics that are disparagingly gendered as feminine. As noted by historians and literary critics alike, early modern women were required to adhere to an ideal of feminine silence, chastity, and obedience. Indeed, early modern women were advised that “There is nothing that becommeth a maid better than soberness, silence, shamefastness, and chastity, both of bodie and mind. For these things being lost, shee is no more a maid, but a strumpet in the sight of God” (Bentley qtd. in Luckyj 63). Participation in witchcraft thus seems to represent a simultaneous rejection of each of the three major ideal traits of femininity: first, consisting of many variations of angry curses, muttered incantations, rhymed charms and sinister giggles, witch-speak is far from the feminine requirement for silence. Instead, through witch-speak the witch performatively invokes demonic power to create action through her words rather than remaining

passively silent. Second, witchcraft was often thought to include sexual involvement with the devil,³³ and indeed, in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Meg confesses to having a sexual relationship with her familiar “twice a week”, confessing also that “he pleas’d [her] well... like a proper man. /... Only his flesh felt cold” (5.5.220, 224-225). And finally, witchcraft, by definition, involves the deliberate and conscious disobedience of Christian teachings through the witch’s demonic pact with the devil in which the devil was thought to “mak[e] them to renounce their God and *Baptisme* directlie... so that all their ill and well doing thereafter, must depende upon him” (James 33). This disobedience also manifests itself in other areas as well: in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, Mistress Generous deliberately disobeys her husband’s wishes. Without asking permission, and without telling him where she is going, she frequently rides out alone in order to convene with the other witches in their demonic rituals. Later, when Generous tries to prevent her from using his horse to go out behind his back, she uses witchcraft to find a way around his prohibition and goes out anyway, proving that Generous cannot control his wife, since her witchcraft helps her to disobey him.³⁴

Although witchcraft represents a rejection of the characteristics associated with ideal early modern femininity, it is not a rejection of the feminine altogether. Early modern witchcraft theories argue that women were more susceptible to the devil’s influence because, among many other reasons, “that sexe is frailer then man is, so it is

³³ The *Malleus Maleficarum*, the fifteenth-century continental authority on witchcraft states that “it is... the common practice of ... all [sorceresses] to perform filthy carnal acts with demons” (Kramer and Sprenger 282).

³⁴ Mistress Generous’s disobedience also has distinctly sexual possibilities since, among other things, Generous rises early to find her bed empty, “the pillow swelled, / Unbrusi’d with any weight, the sheets unruffled, / The curtains neither drawn nor bed laid down, /Which shows she slept not in [his] house tonight” (4.2.20-23). Although Generous has good reason to think that his wife is being unfaithful, he admits that “But for all this, / Yet I cannot be jealous” (4.2.26-27). Whether this is because he is bewitched or just too trusting, it is unclear, but Mistress Generous gets away with her disobedience for quite a while.

easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill” (James 43-44). The *Malleus Maleficarum*, the fifteenth-century continental authority on witchcraft, also lists several characteristics that make women more likely to become “sorcerers”, including their talkativeness: “they have loose tongues and can hardly conceal from their female companions the things that they know through evil art, and since they lack physical strength, they readily seek to avenge themselves secretly through acts of sorcery” (Kramer and Sprenger 164); lustfulness: “she is more carnal than a man, as is clear in connection with many filthy carnal acts” (165); and unruliness: “a woman is unwilling to be ruled but proceeds by her own impulse, even to her own harm” (168). Though these characteristics are the opposite of the feminine ideal of chastity, silence and obedience, they are still feminine, and instead represent the negative or even monstrous side of the feminine: unchecked speech, voracious sexual appetite, and unruly behaviour.³⁵

Significantly, accused witches were often older women. In his treatise, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Reginald Scot notes that

One sort of such as are said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles; poore, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as knowe no religion... They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them. They are doting, scolds, mad, divelish; and not much differing from them that are thought to be possessed with spirits. (5)

³⁵ Witches were also often thought to embrace a perverted form of motherhood—a distinctly feminine role—in relation to their familiars. As Sarah Johnson notes, “we see Sawyer promising Dog her ‘teat’; and besides the sensational detail from Goodcole’s pamphlet that the devil sucked blood from ‘a little above [her] fundament’, the audience would know that it was not uncommon for witch-marks to be discovered on the lower parts of accused witches’ bodies. This simultaneous perversion of ‘sexual and maternal tenderness’ to some extent closes Sawyer off from audience sympathy” (77). Though the witches seem to mother their familiars, they are, as Diane Purkiss calls, “bad mothers” (213), and they infuse this perverted motherhood with an uncontrolled sexuality.

Though Scot's treatise is notable in its unparalleled scepticism about the existence of witches, which Julia M. Garrett connects to Rowley, Dekker and Ford's sympathetic treatment of Elizabeth Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton*, this description also shows many of the ways in which the accused witch's body also deviates from the early modern feminine ideal. Old, deformed, and "full of wrinkles," these women no longer have their youthful feminine beauty, and are often no longer under the control of men: they are widows, spinsters, or scolds. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Elizabeth Sawyer is a spinster³⁶ and is interpreted as a witch even before she actually becomes one because she is "poor, deformed and ignorant" (2.1.3). In a world that often sought to read the "inner truth"³⁷ of a person's soul on the outer, physical body,³⁸ Sawyer's ugly, deformed body would likely be interpreted as "an outward manifestation of inward, moral aberration" (Hirsch 95).

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), the Weird Sisters are similarly old, ugly and deformed: they have beards, and as Brett D. Hirsch notes, "the presence of a beard on a woman was taken to be ... a 'signe and token of [the] heate and of substantiall humour' usually found in male bodies" as well as an indication of their association with witchcraft

³⁶ In his pamphlet entitled *The Wonderful Discoverie of Elizabeth Sawyer a Witch Late of Edmonton*, Henry Goodcole describes the real Elizabeth Sawyer as a spinster several times in his titles, but he also asks why she did not tell her husband that she saw the devil, noting that "her husband testified to the Bench" about the incident. Although there seems to be some discrepancy with regards to Sawyer's marital status in Goodcole's pamphlet, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, it is clear that Rowley, Dekker and Ford's Elizabeth Sawyer is unmarried. Whether she is a spinster or a widow, it hardly matters, as the effect is the same: she is not under the control of any man.

³⁷ It is important to note that although Judith Butler rejects this notion of an "inner truth" as a "fabrication [that is]... instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (*Gender Trouble* 136) through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that ... produce the appearance of substance" (33), the difference between inner truth and outer appearance represents an anxiety that was extremely prevalent in early modern society (Brown and McBride 288).

³⁸ See Michael Torrey "'The Plain Devil and Dissembling Looks': Ambivalent Physiognomy and Shakespeare's *Richard III*" for a discussion of early modern ideas about physiognomy in relation to the deformed body of Richard III.

(97, 94).³⁹ The Weird Sisters' beards can therefore be understood as a physical manifestation of their demonic association and non-conformity to traditional gendered expectations. Indeed their beards make their gendered identities unreadable, preventing Banquo from interpreting them as women:

What are these,
 So withered, and so wild in their attire,
 That look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth
 And yet are on't? ...
 You should be women,
 And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
 That you are so. (1.3.37-40, 43-45)

Their demonic association seems to contribute to their androgyny. As King James notes in *Dæmonologie*, demons cannot have a human gender, “for it is a sure principle of [Philosophie], that nothing can be divided in sexes, except such living bodies as must have a natural seede to genere by. But we know spirites hath no seede proper to themselves, nor yet can they gender one with another” (67-68). Although witches have “living bodies,” unlike the demons with whom they associate, their demonic association and lack of adherence to gendered norms prevents their categorization as “women,” and may indicate that genderlessness – or at least gender ambiguity and non-conformity – is a symptom of this demonic association.

³⁹ Brett D. Hirsch notes that beards on women were also thought to be “a result of the cessation of menstruation” (97) and argues that “It is at this point that the discourses of witchcraft and medicine intersect, since, as we have seen, women who were accused of witchcraft were often elderly and deformed” (99).

The witch thus seems to represent an ambiguous gender category. As the monstrous opposite of the feminine ideal, the witch is not ideally feminine, but not fully masculine either. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the playwrights acknowledge the ambiguity of the witch's gender by establishing a connection between witches and hares: "Tis said hares are like hermaphrodites – one while male and another female – and that which begets this year brings young ones the next, which some think to be the reason that witches take their shapes so oft" (2.2.54-58). The stereotypical witch is somewhat hermaphroditic: not wholly feminine and not wholly masculine but a bit of both and a stable signifier of neither. Indeed, the characters often have trouble interpreting the witches as women because they do not conform to any of the acceptable gendered norms or roles available for women in early modern patriarchal society. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Old Banks refuses to categorize Elizabeth Sawyer as woman – "Woman? A she-hellcat, a witch!" (4.1.36) – choosing to instead to exclude her entirely from a gendered categorization. Significantly, however, if the witch cannot be read as a woman, and does not attempt to conform to the feminine ideal, then it stands to reason that she is also somewhat freed from its constraints, giving her a measure of social agency that she would not have otherwise. But because gender, as Judith Butler suggests, is a "compulsory system," non-conformity to gendered expectations also makes the witch extremely vulnerable to persecution because, as Butler attests, "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (*Gender Trouble* 140). The Lancashire witches, on the other hand, are able to avoid detection for so long because, as women who are described as "well bred, / Of an unquestion'd carriage, [and] well reputed" (2.2.102-104) or "as lovely a lass as any is in Lancashire" (2.2.152), their gendered identities appear stable

and unambiguous. They are able to produce the appearance of respectable femininity strategically, while concealing their witch-like behaviour, and as Diane Purkiss suggests, this can be observed in their speech patterns: “the culprits speak in couplets to each other and in blank verse or prose when passing incognito as ordinary women” (210). However, as soon as they are suspected, the Lancashire witches are reinterpreted as “beldams” (4.1.48), “villainous hags” (5.1.34), “Weird wom[en]” (5.5.88) or “creatures” (5.5.177) instead of ordinary women: in effect, once suspected, witches are no longer women.

Witch-speak, however, is central to the performative identity of a witch. In the early modern period, female speech tended to be representative of other idealized feminine characteristics since, as Christina Luckyj argues, “‘silence’ as it appears in many texts is a code word for women’s acquiescence to patriarchal ideology” and was traditionally seen as an “outward sign of feminine modesty” (62-63). The witch’s unruly speech therefore comes to signify her lack of chastity, and its other-worldly form and demonic performative power signify her disobedience to Christian teachings. As the method through which she enacts her power, the witch’s performative language also signifies and constructs her identity as a witch. Although much has been made of the fact that Sawyer’s marginal social position and deformed body lead her neighbours to suspect her of witchcraft,⁴⁰ it is also significant that these accusations are accusations of witch-speak:

Some call me witch,

And, being ignorant of myself, they go

About to teach me how to be one, urging

⁴⁰ On Sawyer’s marginal status, see Viviana Comensoli 152-157, Julia M. Garrett 327-359, and David Stymeist 33-40.

That my bad tongue, by their bad usage made so,
 Forspeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
 Themselves, their servants and their babes at nurse.
 This they enforce upon me, and in part
 Make me to credit it. (2.1.8-15)

Although Byville notes that the timeline of events in this passage is somewhat ambiguous and that “these ambiguities suggest the circular causality by which social alienation produces witchcraft and witchcraft produces social alienation, a vicious cycle in which the serpent keeps biting its own tail” (19), there does seem to be some truth in these accusations of witch-speak. Sawyer admits that her tongue is “bad” and that they “Make [her] to credit” the accusations, at least in part. Indeed we see some evidence of Sawyer’s “bad tongue.” She curses in her interaction with Old Banks, even before she invokes the devil’s power. Throwing down the sticks she collected from Banks’s property, she curses him: “There they be. Would they struck ‘cross thy throat, thy bowels, thy maw, thy midriff... Dost strike me, slave, curmudgeon! Now thy bones ache, thy joints cramp, and convulsions stretch and crack thy sinews!” (2.1.24-29). Because it is not until later in the scene that the demon Dog appears to her after she curses, it is possible that Sawyer has been cursing her neighbours all along and they have interpreted her futile imprecations as witch-speak, identifying her as a witch, even though her words do not yet have any supernatural performative power.

As Byville notes, it is impossible to tell from Sawyer’s account what came first, the accusation of witchcraft, or her curses after mistreatment at the hands of her socio-economic superiors, but it is also clear that the injurious speech that she endures has, as

Butler argues, an “interpellative power” to constitute the subject who is addressed (*Excitable Speech* 34). In *Excitable Speech*, Butler explains the interpellative power of hate speech through a scenario that is strikingly similar to Sawyer’s experience:

Imagine the quite plausible scene in which one is called by a name and one turns around only to protest the name: ‘That is not me, you must be mistaken!’ And then imagine that the name continues to force itself upon you, to delineate the space you occupy, to construct a social positionality. Indifferent to your protests, the force of interpellation continues to work. One is still constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself. Interpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark, it requires the recognition of an authority at the same time that it confers identity through successfully compelling that recognition. Identity is a function of that circuit, but does not preexist it. The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through a citation of existing convention. (33)

Indeed, Sawyer seems to recognize this interpellative force: “‘Tis all one / To be a witch as to be counted one” (2.1.118-119). In Butler’s terms, her identity as a witch is inaugurated by the names that the other villagers call her; however, it is her behaviour – her curses, her contract with the devil, and her unruly speech – that performatively constitutes her identity and, over time, produces the appearance of a truth to her identity as a witch.⁴¹

⁴¹ Butler discusses the ability of behaviour to performatively produce the appearance of identity in *Gender Trouble* (33).

Significantly, it is not until Sawyer engages in witch-speak that the demon Dog appears to her and offers to infuse her words with supernatural power, in exchange for her soul. Although Sawyer's acceptance of this contract signifies her acceptance of the witch-identity that was originally forced upon her by her community, Dog comes to her because she invokes his supernatural power and expresses her willingness to

give this fury leave to dwell within

This ruined cottage ready to fall with age,
 Abjure all goodness, be at hate with prayer,
 And study curses, imprecations,
 Blasphemous speeches, oaths, detested oaths,
 Or anything that's ill; so I might work
 Revenge upon this miser, this black cur
 That barks and bites, and sucks the very blood
 Of me and of my credit. 'Tis all one
 To be a witch as to be counted one.

Vengeance, shame, ruin light upon that canker! (2.1.110-120)

Engaging in witch-speak calls the devil to her in the form of a demon, Dog, and gives him access to her soul. He arrives saying "Ho! Have I found thee cursing? Now thou art mine own" (2.1.121), which, as Sarah Johnson suggests, is "a line taken almost verbatim from Goodcole's pamphlet" (74), Rowley, Dekker and Ford's source text, where he warns that cursing "brings the Divell to you: for it seemed that when shee so fearefully did sweare, her oaths did so conjure him, that hee must leave then his mansion place, and come at this wretches commande and will, which was by her imprecations" (Goodcole

D3). Even prior to the contract with the devil, Sawyer's supernatural witch-speak proves to be performative in that her imprecations conjure the demon Dog, while simultaneously helping to constitute her performative identity as a witch.

Witchcraft and the Power for Social Disruption

Freed, to a certain extent, from the gendered constraints of the norms of idealized femininity, the witches in *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches* are able to gain a measure of social agency. Through their supernaturally performative witch-speak, they are able to take revenge against the people who wronged them, disrupting the established social and gendered hierarchies in the process, much like how, as Stephanie Irene Spoto argues, “the practice – or presumed practice – of witchcraft and the witch trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries actually disrupted the prevalent gender hierarchies, afforded women unconventional power, and allowed for the increase of power in villages” (53).⁴² The witch had the ability to disrupt existing gender, social and economic hierarchies because she effectively no longer belonged within them. She was therefore also no longer bound by the codes of behaviour that helped to legitimate them because her supernatural witch-speak had, or was thought to have, the performative power to change material conditions, giving her power over her those meant to be above

⁴² Spoto argues that both the accused witches and the women who testified against them experienced an increase in power within their communities: for the first time they were able to find an official legal avenue through which to air their grievances – disputes that had previously been dismissed or ignored as women's issues – putting “some legal and political power into the hands of women, both as witnesses, experts, and even accused, who would have their version of events heard in an official setting” (57). Spoto also notes that some women would identify with the witch-figure because “the identification of ‘witch’ was an identification of relative power, and in most communities the position of ‘witch’ was the highest position of respect attainable for women – especially unmarried women... [M]agic was one of the only ways for women (especially elderly and unmarried women) to gain respect and protection in their villages and communities... The power of these witch-figures in rural areas was such that in Knaresborough Forest, the residents lived side-by-side with various groups of witches that were so powerful that their rich, non-magical neighbors would bring them unrequested gifts and dared not refuse them anything. Such stories of women with power were doubtless appealing to other women who were poverty-stricken, looking for a means to better their situation” (67).

her in the established social hierarchies. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Sawyer makes use of her new-found power to take revenge against Old Banks for refusing to give her charity and destroying her reputation in the town. Her method of revenge here is particularly interesting: at first she wants to kill Old Banks for these slights that have caused her both economic and social hardship, but Dog informs her that she cannot. When she commands Dog to “Go touch his life”, he explains,

Fool, ... I cannot.

Though we have power, know it is circumscribed
 And tied in limits. Though he be curst to thee,
 Yet of himself he is loving to the world
 And charitable to the poor. Now men
 That, as he, love goodness, though in smallest measure,
 Live without compass of our reach. His cattle
 And corn I'll kill and mildew, but his life,
 Until I take him as I late found thee,
 Cursing and swearing, I have no power to touch. (2.1.156-165)

The devil’s power is limited by God, meaning he can only “touch [the] life” of those in whom “he first finde an entresse reddy for him, either by the great ignorance of the person he deales with, joyned with an evill life, or else by their carelesnes and contempt of God” (James 32). Even though they cannot kill Old Banks, they can work to ensure “his fall” (2.1.167) by destroying his “corn and cattle” (2.1.166). Significantly, her revenge against the mistreatment that caused her economic hardship will have significant economic effects: by targeting Old Banks’s livelihood – his crops and his cattle – she will

destroy the economic prosperity of the man who wronged her, potentially dragging him down to her level of poverty. Sawyer's supernaturally performative witch-speak gives her power over her socio-economic superiors, thereby disrupting – by potentially inverting – the town's social and economic hierarchy.

In *The Late Lancashire Witches* the witches invert social and gendered hierarchies as a prank. Targeting the Seely family for, we learn later, a passing slight against a “weird woman” with an “ill-bred son” (5.5.88-91), the witches turn the family hierarchy completely on its head: the son rules over the father, the daughter over the mother, the wife over her husband, and the servants over their masters. Although Brome and Heywood's depiction of the resulting chaos is quite comic, several of the characters who watch from the sidelines do not think it is funny at all. Not only is it “unnatural” (1.2.37), the social disruption within the Seely household also has some potentially serious consequences. Doughty and Arthur take in the Seely family, dividing the household between the two because they

cannot... approve them fit

To be their own disposers, that would give

The governance of such a house and living

Into their vassals' hands, to thrust them out on't

Without or law or order. (4.3.23-27)

While the family is bewitched, Seely defers to not only his son, but also his servants who, left in charge “of such a house and living” could potentially squander his entire estate, leaving him penniless. To counteract the prank's potentially lasting economic effects, Arthur takes steps to protect his uncle's economic assets through a “wholesome order /

By the judicious of the commonwealth” (4.3.30-31) while they are bewitched and unable to think properly.

In the course of the play it is clear that the social disruption is also very much tied to unruly speech. Not only do the witches’ spells performatively produce their material effects, the lengthy and quite comic conflict between the newlyweds, Parnell and Lawrence is staged as a conflict that manifests itself in unruly female speech. Although the conflict is exacerbated by Moll’s revenge on Lawrence which has made him impotent, the main issue is that Parnell is a scold. Not only does she berate and beat her husband within their home, she also speaks immodestly, airing their dirty laundry within the community as well, revealing her lack of chastity prior to their marriage, her husband’s sexual issues, and her general unruliness. The men make multiple attempts to silence her and restrain her speech: “Nay, hold, Parnell, hold!... She caterwauls, I think. Parnell, be patient, good Parnell, and a little modest too; ‘tis not amiss” (4.3.96-105). However, because her unruly language and behaviour is a symptom of the witchcraft that has inverted the gender hierarchy within their household, she cannot be controlled. As Alison Findlay notes, even the villagers’ skimmington, a social ritual designed to shame and ridicule couples into maintaining the gendered hierarchy within the household, does not have its intended effect; instead, the bewitched couple beat up the skimmingtons, Parnell making the first move with her hen-pecked husband following her lead (155-156).

In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Mother Sawyer’s unruly speech takes the form of a lengthy social commentary that effectively draws parallels between witchcraft and other problems prevalent in early modern society. When the Justice tries to get her to confess to witchcraft, Sawyer responds aggressively, and while at first he attempts to restrain her

speech, telling her “Be not so furious”, “You are too saucy and too bitter,” signalling that she is moving beyond the limits of socially acceptable speech, Sir Arthur eventually persuades the Justice to give in and give her leave to say something that will incriminate herself: “Pray, sir, give way, and let her tongue gallop on” (4.1.75, 81, 102). Here, Sawyer speaks under what Lisa Jardine calls the “scold’s privilege,”⁴³ which allows her to speak freely much like the traditional fool who speaks under the privilege of comic misrule (117-118). As a figure of disorder – a witch and a scold – Sawyer is like the traditional fool in that she is not bound by traditional hierarchies so her speech is unrestrained: she can be saucy, bitter, furious, and talkative. Like the fool, she does not pay attention to social distinctions and her insightful social commentary has an equalizing effect: she compares her sins to those committed by people of higher social stations and shows that despite the differences in wealth and title, they are just as evil and sinful as she is, if not more so. And, like the fool, she speaks truth, and as Jardine suggests, these are “truths no one else dare voice” (117); through her unruly and unrestrained speech, Sawyer suggests that evil is everywhere, not just in witchcraft.

Confession and the Containment of Supernatural Threat

Although both *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches* clearly show that witchcraft has the power to disrupt the established social and gendered hierarchies, this threat is contained by the restoration of order in the plays’ resolutions: the witches are caught, and the disruptive effects of witch-speak are dissipated. In both

⁴³ Lisa Jardine draws on the work of Natalie Zemon Davis to argue that “the woman’s voice as prophetic outsider links her with the traditional fool... The female shrew/scold/prophet acquires, on this account, the verbal (and at some times physical) licence of the fool in motley, or the acerbic melancholic. She utters (and acts) with impunity, under the extended privilege of the Misrule carnival” (117). Jardine extends her idea of the “scold’s privilege” beyond the context of the carnival in her discussion of Queen Margaret in *Richard III*. She argues that Queen Margaret becomes “just such a privileged carping voice, somewhere between witch and female prophet: uttering truths no one else dare voice, accompanied by the curses which wreak... actual bodily harm on the protagonists” (117).

The Witch of Edmonton and *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the witches lose their power soon after their witch-identities are discovered and they are caught. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the effects of the witches' charms and spells vanish as soon as the witch is "apprehended under the hands / Of lawful authority" (5.5.96-97). As Coffin suggests, although women often participated in accusations of witchcraft, "in the fictive world of drama the play clearly pits women witches against male pursuers: all witches are female (Whetstone is only briefly suspected of witchcraft), and though their victims include both men and women the latter do not participate in the witch-hunt led by old Doughty" (95). Here, demonic female linguistic power is superseded by legitimate patriarchal authority and the spells that disrupted the social and gendered hierarchy are "dissolv'd" (5.5.98) so the son no longer commands his father, the daughter her mother, and the wife her husband. Events, roles and hierarchies return to normal: as they "should" be.

Similarly, in *The Witch of Edmonton*, Dog abandons Sawyer precisely as she is about to be caught, revealing that the performative power of her words was never her own power to control. After three days without help from him, Sawyer calls on Dog, using the performative spell that he taught her, which previously proved effective, before resorting to cursing in frustration:

Not yet come!

I must then fall to my old prayer,

Sanctibiceter nomen tuum.

Not yet come! Worrying of wolves, biting of mad dogs, the manges and
the – (5.1.23-27)

Dog then appears, cutting short her intended curse against him, but instead of appearing to her as a black dog, he appears in white, and refuses to do her bidding. When she threatens to “sell my self to twenty thousand fiends / To have thee torn in pieces” (5.1.58-59), he replies “Thou canst not. Thou art so ripe to fall into hell, that no more of my kennel will so much as bark at him that hangs thee” (5.1.60-61), revealing that she is powerless to make him follow her orders. For the devil, the purpose of the contract with the witch is not to infuse her words and gestures with unlimited supernatural power; it is to claim the witch’s soul, which he can do at any point. Once Sawyer orders Dog to drive Anne Ratcliffe to her death and the townspeople suspect Sawyer’s involvement, the demon Dog has no further incentive or obligation to lend her any more of his power because with this action, she has sealed her fate: “the glass of thy sins is full, and it must run out at gallows” (5.1.63-64). Although the contract with the devil does grant the witch a measure of social power, it does not protect her from the devil himself.

Once they are caught, the Lancashire witches’ familiars also abandon them. When the “*witches charm together*” (5.5.152.1) to call their familiars, who do not come, the men mock their efforts: “Shame take you for a fardel of fools. Have you known so many of the devil’s tricks and can be ignorant of that common feat of the old juggler, that is, to leave you all to the law when you are once seized on by the talons of authority?” (5.5.158-162). It seems to be a well known fact that witches are powerless against legal authority because the devil will always abandon them. As Coffin notes, traditional methods of containing social disruption are “powerless” against witchcraft: “the villagers’ skimmington (a humiliating ritual involving the parading of hen-pecked husband and aggressive wife) is literally dismantled by the uncontrollable Parnell” (94).

Instead, the legal prosecution of witches under masculine authority seems to be the only method that is able to effectively contain the supernatural threat of witchcraft. In *Dæmonologie*, King James explains that this is because the power of the “lawfull Magistrate” is backed by God:

If they be but apprehended and detained by anie private person, upon other private respectes, their power no doubt either in escaping, or in doing hurte, is no lesse nor ever it was before. But if on the other parte, their apprehending and detention be by the lawfull Magistrate, upon the just respectes of their guiltinesse in that craft, their power is then no greater then before that ever they medled with their master. For where God beginnes justlie to strike by his lawfull Lieutennentes, it is not in the Devilles power to defraude or bereave him of the office, or effect of his powerfull and revenging Scepter. (50-51)

The “lawfull Magistrate” derives his power from God, the ultimate patriarchal authority, and as a result, as Doughty puts it, he is “able in spite of all your bugs-words to stave off the grand devil for doing any of you good till you come to his kingdom to him” (5.5.167): the performative witch-speak that has been disrupting the social order within the community is no match for the legitimate and divinely-backed power of masculine legal authority.

Part of the legal containment of the threat that the witches represent is the symbolic reintegration of the criminal into the community through the restorative speech act of confession. As Todd Butler explains,

to confess was simultaneously to accept one's own condemnation and to secure the divine forgiveness offered to a newly penitent sinner. When rendered before a crowd gathered to witness the criminal's execution, the early modern judicial confession helped reaffirm the trial process itself, paradoxically reintegrating criminals into the community by first restating and then abandoning their alien status. (140)

Significantly, this acceptance, transformation, and reintegration take place through performative language: as Byville briefly suggests, confession becomes a speech act that is socially necessary to counteract unruly witch-speak and reaffirm the restoration of order (26). However, as a performative speech act, confession is also bound to the conditions that ensure its felicity, and as such, "*the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly... [and] completely*" (Austin 36). In the case of confession, this means that since

the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts, feelings, or intentions, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, ... a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts, feelings, or intentions, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves; ... and the participants must so conduct themselves subsequently. (39)

In these terms, Mistress Generous's insincere confession that she later celebrates as "some passionate words mix'd with forc'd tears / [that] Did so enchant his eyes and ears" (4.4.25-26) would not only be understood to be "unhappy," but also a deliberate "misexecution" of conventional procedure (Austin 17). Mistress Generous's "confession"

can therefore be understood as a form of resistance against the expected speech act, and as such, yet another form of unruly speech.

As Luckyj argues, “feminine silence can [also] be constructed as a space of subjective agency which threatens masculine authority” (60). Elizabeth Sawyer’s refusal to confess can then be interpreted as a form of resistance against the community that seeks to prosecute her: “I’ll confess nothing, / And not confessing, who dare come and swear / I have bewitched them? I’ll not confess one mouthful” (5.1.65-67). Sawyer sees confession as an admission of guilt that will succeed only in confirming the accusations against her. Instead, she hopes that by refusing to confess and remaining defiantly silent on the issue, the Justice will not be able to prove that she was responsible for Anne Ratcliffe’s death and the disruption within the community. By deliberately not speaking, she hopes to keep the power that she has gained in her community through her unruly speech: if they continue to fear her potential for injurious witch-speak, they will not dare to come forward to accuse her because they will not know the devil has abandoned her. Speaking – either to curse ineffectively or to confess – would reveal her lack of power. It is only by refusing to speak at all – “I’ll muzzle up my tongue from telling tales” (5.1.69-70) – that she has any hope of preserving the illusion of her performative linguistic power.

Dog, however, in his demonic ability to guess the outcome of her trial,⁴⁴ assures her that she will be condemned anyway (5.1.71). Confession is part of that process

⁴⁴ In *Dæmonologie*, James I explains that the devil “knowes not all things future, but yet that he knowes parte, the Tragical event of historie declares it, ... not that he hath any prescience, which is only proper to God: or yet knows anie thing by loking upon God, as in a mirrour (as the good Angels doe) he being for ever debarred from the favorable presence & countenance of his creator, but only by one of these two means, either as being worldlie wise, and taught by an continuall experience, ever since the creation, judges by likelie-hood of things to come, according to the like that hath passed before, and the naturall causes, in respect of the vicissitude of all things worldly: Or else by Gods employing of him in a turne, and so foreseene thereof” (4-5).

though, and Dog predicts that “ere the executioner catch thee full in’s claws, thou’lt confess all” (5.1.73-74). Indeed, Mother Sawyer does eventually confess on her way to the gallows, saying “I repent all former evil; / There is no damned conjurer like the devil” (5.3.50-51). With her confession, Sawyer performatively renounces the devil, but in so doing she also effectively confirms the legitimacy of her own conviction. However, as Todd Butler and Diane Purkiss suggest, Sawyer is not fully repentant (T. Butler 140-141; Purkiss 242): instead of openly repenting the acts that she has committed, she remains resistant to a full confession. Her assertion that “there’s no damned conjurer like the devil” (5.3.51) is less of an admission of wrongdoing than an expression of frustration over being deceived by Dog and losing her powers.

In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the witches express a similar resistance to confession. Once caught, Mistress Generous, Gillian, Mawd, Moll and Meg are pressed to speak to the truth of the accusations against them, in other words, to confess their guilt. Rather than denying the accusations, Mistress Generous refuses to comment: “I will say nothing, but what you know, you know, / And as the law shall find me let it take me” (5.5.198-199), to which Moll adds “Other confession you get none from us” (5.5.201). Here they see their confessions as contributing to the evidence against them and their silence becomes a refusal to aid in their own condemnation. Without a confession, “the law” can only convict them on the basis of the limited physical evidence and witness testimony which may or may not stand up under scrutiny.

While the majority of the Lancashire witches follow Mistress Generous’s lead in refusing to confess, Meg remains silent, which Doughty takes as a sign of her potential compliance. His questioning of her reveals the importance of confession as a speech act

necessary to dissipate the threat that the witch and her unruly witch-speak posed to the community. Doughty encourages Meg to speak but with certain conditions: “Thou wilt speak, and tell the truth, and shalt have favour, doubt not. Say, art not thou a witch?” (5.5.209-211). Here he asks for a specific kind of speech act – a confession – that, in Austin’s terms, adheres to the necessary conditions that would ensure that it is “happily, successfully performed” (116): it must be truthful and sincere. Unlike the dangerous and socially disruptive nature of performative witch-speak, confession is a speech act that will help to re-establish the social order, the witch’s place within it, and, as Todd Butler suggests, “reiterates the justice of the legal process” (129). Doughty’s assurance that Meg “shalt have favour” when she confesses is part of the process of the witch’s social reintegration. By confessing, Meg acknowledges “‘Tis folly to dissemble” (5.5.212, 219) and transforms herself into a “newly penitent sinner” (T. Butler 140) thereby helping to distinguish the boundary between good and evil.

Part of the restoration of order achieved through the witch’s confession is the reintegration of the witch into her proper feminine role. Prior to Meg’s confession, Bantam describes the witches as “creatures, women I dare not call ‘em” (5.5.177-178). Because of their association with the devil and their performative identities as witches – an ambiguously gendered category – they cannot be identified as women, an admission that calls to mind Banquo’s similar difficulty in interpreting the gendered identities of the bearded Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* who “look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ earth” (1.3.39). When Doughty attempts to get Meg to confess, he calls her a “poor old woman” (5.5.208), showing her sympathy by addressing her as part of the gendered category to which she would once again belong if she were to confess; however, he then retracts that

categorization in his aside – “I’ll dandle a witch a little” (5.5.208-209) – revealing to the audience that Meg still belongs to the category of “witch,” at least until she renounces her association with the devil through confession. Once Meg confesses, Doughty praises her: “That’s a good woman” (5.5.214). Through the socially expected speech act of confession, Meg not only renounces her identity as a witch, she is also reintegrated into the social role of the “good woman.”

By depicting the witch as the monstrous opposite of the “good woman,” she becomes a figure “against whom order can be defined” (Purkiss 201), and the plays themselves become warnings against the dangers of unruly female speech. Although *The Witch of Edmonton* does portray Elizabeth Sawyer sympathetically, and the playwrights present the witches comically in *The Late Lancashire Witches*, the plays also show that participating in the unruly speech of witchcraft is not a reliable or lasting way to change one’s social position. The audience watches as the stage-witch, predictably, loses her soul to the devil, is caught by lawful authority, is abandoned by her familiars, and is effectively condemned to spend eternity in Hell. In both *The Late Lancashire Witches* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, the plays’ resolutions reinforce the connection between witchcraft and unruly speech, warning against both. In *The Late Lancashire Witches*, as the witches are led away to their trial, Robin jeers at Mistress Generous, suggesting that “the horse that stays for [her] rides better with a halter than your jingling bridle” (5.5.244-245). While his suggestion that the horse “rides better with a halter” insinuates that he believes Mistress Generous will be hanged, his reference to the “jingling bridle” with which she turned him into a horse also draws a distinct parallel between the witches’ performative language and the scold’s unruly speech. The “jingling bridle” of Mistress

Generous's charm here recalls the early modern punishment of the "scold's bridle," which placed over the head of a convicted scold, prevented her from speaking while she was led through the town to be shamed and ridiculed by her neighbours (Brown and McBride 67). The witches' progress to the county assizes is also strikingly similar to the scold's public shaming as they are led through the town as "untoward cattle" to their presumed punishment (5.5.250). In this parallel between the witch and the scold, witchcraft becomes simply an extreme form of unruly female speech.

In *The Witch of Edmonton* the playwrights present a similar warning against the dangers of unruly speech and its relation to witchcraft. After he abandons Sawyer, Dog explains to Young Banks,

I'll thus much tell thee. Thou never art so distant
 From an evil spirit but that thy oaths,
 Curses and blasphemies pull him to thine elbow.
 Thou never tellest a lie but that a devil
 Is within hearing it; thy evil purposes
 Are ever haunted. But when they come to act,
 As thy tongue slandering, bearing false witness,
 Thy hand stabbing, stealing, cozening, cheating,
 He's then within thee. Thou playst, he bets upon thy part.
 Although thou lose, yet he will gain by thee. (5.1.128-137)

Here, unruly speech is not only associated with witchcraft, it is the direct cause.

According to the demon Dog, the way to be protected against the devil's influence is to avoid cursing, swearing oaths, lying, blaspheming, slandering, cozening and bearing false

witness, speech acts that Dog places on par with actions such as stabbing, stealing and cheating. In Dog's descriptions, the warning is clear: there is nothing to be gained by unruly speech that will "pull [the devil] to thine elbow" – no one wins when they gamble with the devil, except, of course, the devil himself.

Conclusion

For the cursing female character, cursing represents an attempt to use her voice to gain a measure of social agency. Using her words as weapons, she calls on unseen forces – God or the devil – to grant her curse its performative power. Angry, vengeful, and powerful, the curse is not an obviously feminine speech act. It has the potential to represent a significant transgression from the feminine ideal of silent passivity, yet the curse is not wholly masculine either. As a performative utterance, the curse is connected to other political and legal performatives that, in the early modern period, belonged to an almost exclusively male domain, but as Keith Thomas suggests, curses are “employed by the weak against the strong, never the other way around” (509). In *Richard III*, Queen Margaret, Lady Anne, and the Duchess of York curse after they have lost their families because they have no other way to fight back against the man who murdered them. In *All's Lost by Lust* and *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, Jacinta and Lucina curse their attackers before and after they are sexually assaulted. In *The Witch of Edmonton*, Elizabeth Sawyer curses when she has no other way to change her marginal social position.

Neither completely feminine nor completely masculine, the curse combines masculine and feminine elements and therefore has the potential to disrupt the cursing person's performative production of a stable gender identity. For the cursing female character, because the curse contains elements of the feminine as well as the masculine, where cursing represents only a minor transgression of the norms of idealized femininity and is not accompanied by a complete rejection of the feminine ideal as in witchcraft, the cursing woman's performance of femininity remains relatively stable. For Margaret,

Anne, and the Duchess, cursing is a form of feminine lament – an expression of their grief for their loved ones that makes use of their uniquely feminine connections as widows and bereaved mothers to give their curses power. For Jacinta and Lucina, cursing is an attempt to prove their non-consent to their forced sexual encounters and maintain their appearance of chastity – a feminine ideal – despite their physical violation.

Although even in these cases, cursing is still far from the ideal of passive silence, their curses are a “natural” reaction to the injustices they experience as women, and therefore do not seem to disrupt the performative production of their feminine identities.

The witch’s curse is different, however. As Cooper Thomas notes in *Sathan Transformed into an Angell of Light* (1622), “when a bad tongued woman shall curse a partie, and *death* shortly follow, this is a shrewd token that shee is a *Witch*, because *Witches* are accustomed to execute their mischevous practises by cursing and banning” (Cooper 275). Performative witch-speak, of which the curse is a part, is indicative of an association with the devil – an association which, according to contemporary witchcraft theories, was thought to also involve the witch’s rejection of the virtues conventionally belonging to her gender. Not only was the witch far from silent, she was also unchaste, since as Kramer and Sprenger note in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, “it is... the common practice of... all [sorceresses] to perform filthy carnal acts with demons” (282); and disobedient since her pact with the devil meant that she “renounce[d] [her] God and *Baptisme* directlie” (James 33). Where cursing represents yet another violation of the norms of idealized feminine behaviour, it becomes impossible for the accused witch to maintain her performative production of a coherent feminine gender identity. Instead, her curses help to performatively construct her ambiguously-gendered identity as a witch –

an identity that, once recognized, becomes incompatible with the performative identity of the virtuous woman. She is “a she-hellcat, a witch!” (Rowley, Dekker, and Ford 4.1.36), “villainous ha[ng]” (Brome and Heywood 5.1.34), or a “creatur[e]” (5.5.177) rather than a woman.

However, even where cursing is not accompanied by a complete rejection of ideal feminine characteristics, the cursing woman still risks being seen as less of a woman for cursing and becoming ostracized by her community for “fail[ing] to do [her] gender right” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 140). This danger can be seen most clearly in *All's Lost by Lust* and *The Tragedy of Valentinian* where Jacinta's and Lucina's curses have the potential to make them seem less chaste even as they fight to prove their chastity. As Karen Bamford argues, “for modern readers Jacinta's unalloyed anger,” exemplified in her curses, “is no doubt a welcome contrast to the suicidal grief of Lucrece and Lucina, [but] for Jacobean audiences it would probably have compromised her status as a sympathetic victim” (108). Since Jacinta and Lucina's social positions are already jeopardized by their forced but illicit sexual knowledge, their curses have the potential to further damage their maintenance of a virtuous femininity since cursing moves beyond a strict adherence to idealized gender norms. This danger is also seen in moments like in *Richard III* where Richard calls Margaret a “foul wrinkled witch” and a “withered hag” (1.3.164, 212) despite the lack of any evidence of her affiliation with the devil. Such moments warn that the cursing woman's speech potentially crosses the line between the socially permissible and impermissible, and pushes against the boundaries of the existing social order. The cursing woman is called a witch as an attempt to restrain, minimize, or purge her disruptive influence, but this attempt to define the cursing woman as a witch

also reveals that cursing is a disruption to her continued performative production of a virtuous feminine identity. While Margaret's social position as a noble widow seems to save her from being persecuted as a witch, especially since her curses can be justified as a form of feminine lament for her murdered husband, Elizabeth Sawyer, who similarly is called a witch before she actually becomes one, is not so lucky. Unlike Margaret, she occupies an extremely marginal position in her community, and as a social outcast, her curses are not interpreted as feminine and instead become evidence of her identity as witch.

The amount of agency cursing actually gives the cursing woman therefore depends largely on the social position of the speaker and whether or not her curses could be considered to be justified. Queen Margaret, Lady Anne, and the Duchess of York belong to the nobility but have lost their political influence because of treason, murder, and the tyrannical Richard III. Their curses grant them agency in that they are able to help restore the balance of power within the social order since their curses effectively help to cause Richard's downfall, but they are not able to use that agency to change their own social status since they cannot bring back their murdered husbands and with them their connection to political power. For Jacinta and Lucina, ravished women, cursing allows them to ensure that they are able to participate in the revenge against their attackers from which they would otherwise be excluded, but it cannot erase the wrong done to them, change the lasting social consequences of their status as rape victims, or even prevent their own deaths in the end. For witches like Elizabeth Sawyer, Mistress Generous, Gillian, Mawd, Moll and Meg, however, cursing grants them the power to disrupt the social order, raising their own social statuses in the process. Of all the cursing

women, cursing seems to give witches the most power, but for them, cursing also represents the greatest deviation from the feminine ideal. Such performative witch-speak is unruly, uncontrolled, demonic, and extremely powerful, and as such, the witch's curse is also the most dangerous to established social order. Indeed, in *The Witch of Edmonton* and *The Late Lancashire Witches*, performative witch-speak gives the witches a great deal of power for a short period of time, but this power does not last – legitimate patriarchal authority triumphs over the disruptive, cursing witches, and in the end they find themselves in a worse position than the one in which they started.

Justified curses, backed by the power of God, give the cursing woman the agency to ensure that justice is served. These curses do not completely disrupt the cursing woman's performative femininity despite the curse's masculine elements. Instead, these justified curses – uttered against tyrannical kings and rapists – allow the cursing woman to call on God to restore justice. Her curses therefore support the existing social order, but do not give her the ability to change her own place within it. For witches, cursing and performative witch-speak are able to grant them the power to disrupt the existing social hierarchy and change their places within it, but by the end of the plays their power is contained, order is restored, and good triumphs over evil. The figure of the witch seems to be feared and demonized precisely because she represents the potential to deviate from cultural constraints; she represents “the possibility of a failure to repeat” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 141) the consistent adherence to norms of idealized feminine behaviour that, in early modern patriarchal society, kept women in subordinate positions to men. In a society that believed that according to “GOD and nature... [*a woman's*] husband is [*her*] superior, [*her*] better” (Whatley 36, emphasis in original), the angry, vengeful, and

potentially powerful curse that disrupted social, economic, and gendered hierarchies could therefore only be backed by the devil. For the cursing female character, however, the curse represents an opportunity to fight against the injustices she experiences using the only weapons she has available to her – her words.

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