TO CONVERSE WITH THE DEVIL? SPEECH, SEXUALITY, AND WITCHCRAFT IN EARLY MODERN SCOTLAND

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In 1671, Janet McMuldroch and Elspeth Thomsone were both arrested and tried for the serious crime of witchcraft in Dumfries, Scotland. As with many other alleged witches, testimony against these women focused on their quarrelsome nature and their tendency to scold or curse those who entered into disagreements with them. Elspeth, for example, was reported to have quarrelled with Regina McGee and her husband after she was not invited to the birth and baptism of their child; in retaliation she promised “to doe them ane ill turne and to cause them to rue it,” words that supposedly caused Regina to immediately fall ill. In the nearby parish of Girthon, several witnesses testified to experiencing similar negative consequences following the curses and ill wishes of Janet McMuldroch. In one case, Janet “went away cursing” after being kicked by an “accidental tuitch” of John Murray’s foot; she was subsequently held accountable when John lost two calves and a horse several weeks later.

These depositions were gathered by the local presbytery and presented to the Justiciary Court, which reviewed the evidence and passed sentence on both Janet and Elspet. In addition to this local testimony, the records of the Justiciary Court also included indictments of diabolism with

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both women being accused of entering into a pact with Satan, agreeing to become his servant, receiving his ‘marks’ upon their flesh, and having “carnall dealing or copula.oune [copulation] with the devil.” The inclusion of these diabolical features at a later stage in the trial was a relatively common practice in the prosecution of alleged witches, which demonstrates the court’s concern with documenting and disciplining the supposed deviant sexuality of accused witches.

In both of the above cases, the women involved were accused of witchcraft as a consequence of their wilful and disorderly speech; yet, in the course of the witch trial, they were also accused and convicted of participating in an unnatural sexual relationship with the devil. Countless other cases demonstrate similar concerns with alleged witches’ speech and sexuality, a trend that indicates that these two characteristics were critical aspects of the ‘witch’ as constructed in contemporary Scottish witch belief. In examining the trial records in Scotland a certain image of the witch emerges, but what was it about this image that made this person such a threat to society? Why were these characteristics and behaviours considered so frightening that they could only be controlled by systematic hunting and extermination within the Scottish population? This essay attempts to address these questions by using the records of the witch trials to reconstruct the witch in contemporary Scottish belief. By looking at the specific qualities embodied by the witch, we can better understand how these stereotypes functioned not only to promote fear and conformity within the population, but also as part of a larger discourse on the legitimacy and authority of speech.

Historians of the Scottish witch trials have recently begun to look more specifically at how witch belief was constructed in Scotland. By sifting through the numerous court proceedings against alleged witches, scholars have been
able to reconstruct many contemporary beliefs about witches and, therefore, the cultural values and fears of the society that produced them. Several authors have utilized this approach, focusing on such topics as regional and social variation of witch belief, explorations of fairy and demonological beliefs, investigations of witch trial narratives, and the social and global context of witch beliefs. In exploring witch belief, these works and others have been fundamental in establishing a methodological approach to understanding and deconstructing Scottish witch belief. Interestingly, while discussions of witch belief abound, applications of this approach have, in general, tended to avoid the question of gender. This is perhaps surprising in light of the fact that the vast majority of accused witches were female. Of the thousands of individuals accused of witchcraft in early modern Scotland, it is believed that about 85% were women. Although men could be and indeed were accused of witchcraft, being female greatly increased one’s likelihood of being labelled a witch. While not all witches were women, the fact that the archetypal witch was identifiably female suggests that ideas about gender must have influenced – and been influenced by – contemporary witch belief. On the other hand, the fact that men were also accused of witchcraft indicates that witch hunts should not be seen as the simple misogynistic targeting and oppression of women. Clearly, these patterns demand that we include gender in the study of witch belief as well as look beyond it in order to understand the witch hunt as a whole.

This is not to say that gender has been overlooked entirely in the study of Scottish witchcraft. Christina Larner was one of the first to specifically address this relationship, articulating many of the links between negative characteristics of femininity and witch-hood. As Julian Goodare points out, however, Larner stopped short of explaining why witches were women, arguing instead that witch hunts were sex-
related rather than sex-specific. In his work on women and witches, Goodare attempts to draw these connections to their logical conclusions, arguing that women were associated with witchcraft as a result of the church and state’s promotion of moral conformity, which often sought to suppress and demonize sexuality. In another work on gender and witchcraft, Lauren Martin has argued that witch belief in Scotland revolved heavily around ideas of women’s work and the domestic sphere. For instance, many witch’s curses resulted from quarrels between female neighbours and often targeted the tasks of the domestic woman, such as milk production and dairying, brewing, healing, and child-rearing. Martin argues that these and other associations between women and witchcraft resulted in the demonization of female domesticity and a de-valuing of women’s roles in society. However, Martin’s examples can also be used to support the opposite conclusion: in attacking female domesticity, witchcraft actually normalized women’s work in the home by demonizing those who sought to disrupt it. Nonetheless, in studying gender not as a direct cause but as a function and corollary of witch belief, Martin provides an important methodological approach for deconstructing witch belief as evidence of contemporary gender relations.

These works have contributed irreplaceably to the study of gender in the context of the witch trials. Following in the tradition of this rich body of scholarship, this essay seeks to approach the gendering of witches by noting how certain gender stereotypes – specifically speech and sexuality – were utilized in the witch trial and Scottish witch belief. By looking at how these specific behaviours and characteristics were demonized by witch hunting, we can begin to understand why these qualities in particular were targeted for elimination, not just to produce moral conformity and a godly society, but to produce and reinforce a very specific organization of power. Before we can interpret what the
effects of witch hunting on society were, however, we must first identify what particular qualities were embodied by witches that made them such a threat to their communities and society at large.

As studies of witch belief have shown, the depositions of the witch trials can be taken as evidence of the concerns and values of the local populations who participated in witch hunting. They can further be used to reconstruct an image of the witch as it appeared in popular ideology. This popular belief – reflected in the depositions of neighbours – is largely considered by historians of Scottish witchcraft to be distinct from elite witch ideology, which is instead associated with the confessions of alleged witches. The surprising degree of conformity across time and space in these documents, as well as the differences between the two groups, supports this conclusion. Each belief system appears to be concerned with a particular set of characteristics of the witch, not necessarily shared by the other. In studying popular witch belief in Scotland, for example, Christina Larner observes:

A witch was a neighbour. She was most likely a mature female, though not necessarily elderly or solitary. She was likely to be on the more impoverished end of the village socio-economic scale, certainly poorer than those who accused her. She was likely to be quarrelsome. She might or might not have a reputation for healing as well as for harming, but above all she was deemed to have malevolent supernatural powers. ¹¹

This description expresses several of the defining features that appear consistently in the local records and depositions against alleged witches, reflecting a set of popular witch beliefs that are considered distinct – although potentially overlapping – with elite beliefs. These depositional sources therefore suggest that the above behaviours were of grave
concern to regional communities as they sought to identify and eradicate witches from their midst. Consequently, these traits help us to begin to identify how witch belief was used to control certain behaviours in the population at the local level.

The first feature identified by Larner was that the witch was a neighbour; she or he would have been an individual that resided within the community rather than separate from it. It was therefore the community’s responsibility to identify the hidden threat of witchcraft, encouraging an atmosphere of distrust and community policing that was characteristic of witch hunting. In order to help differentiate friend from foe, suspected witches were often identified by their reputations. A reputation for witchcraft was commonly used as evidence in the witch trials, and was often considered sufficient proof for an individual’s arrest. Margaret McWilliam was tried in 1662, but had had a reputation for witchcraft for many years; “since memory of any alive that knew the said Margret she went under the name of a witch,’ and was accused of being one as far back as 1631.”

When called on to give evidence of Patrick Lowrie’s character in 1605, David Mills “deponit that [Patrick] wes bruteit [reputed] and comounlie callit ‘Pait the Witch!’” These reputations might take years to solidify, but once in place, were difficult to overcome. Under these circumstances, a reputation for ‘honesty’ could be an individual’s most important alibi during a witch hunt.

A reputation for witchcraft revealed the hidden quality of the witch’s evil and malicious nature. It was this quality of malice, or *maleficium*, that made her (or him) dangerous and established the witch’s ill will against others in the community. Witches were often reported to have been nurturing some feeling of vengeance, jealousy, or anger when the Devil first came to them. In the trial of Isobell Smith in 1662, the accused confessed to meeting with the Devil many times, the first of which occurred when she was alone and
contemplating revenge, which led her to renounce her baptism and engage in the Devil’s Pact. This malice was characteristic of all witches, and was directed at the person or property of the witch’s victim, resulting in misfortune such as illness, failure of crops, drying up of milk, impotence, strange weather and death.

While malice gave the Scottish witch her power, the witch’s supernatural abilities required a medium through which to enact her ill will. This frequently manifested itself in the form of quarrelling and cursing. This quarrelsomeness or “irascibility” came to be identified as one of the most important characteristics of the Scottish witch; in Larner’s words: “No cursing: no malefice; no witch.” Elizabeth Maxwell, an accused witch from Dumfries in 1650, clearly exhibits this quarrelsomeness in the records of her trial. When a neighbour had sought payment for a debt from her daughter, “with vpbraiding words cursing and railing … [Elizabeth] threattned that shoe sould er Lang Loss hir grace,” after which the neighbour’s husband shortly became ill and with “excessive sweating dies of two day seiknes.” The compilation of other accusations against Elizabeth indicates that her uncontrolled verbal behaviour was well known in her community. Like other witches, her scolding revealed the manifestation of her malevolent supernatural powers, focused through the witch’s *maleficium* (malice), activated by speech, and directed at the livestock, person, or property of her enemy. Upon her incarceration, Elizabeth declared that “it would be a deir wairding” upon the bailiff who put her there “whairypon very soon theireftir the said Thomas contracted a verie heavie disease which continuing for the space of two years at Last took away his Lyff.”

Elizabeth’s example shows that not only were witches known for their malice, they were feared for their words. In this case, the words of witches were believed to carry such potency that a woman could be held responsible for a man’s
death two years after yelling at him for throwing her in jail. Witches’ words, as both curses and quarrels, were therefore clearly a defining characteristic of the witch, and one of their most deadly features. Consequently, it was the witch’s words that most needed to be controlled.

In Scotland, as well as elsewhere, witchcraft was characterized by performative acts of speech, such as cursing, charming, sorcery, spell-craft, incantation, and many others. Indeed, it is spell-casting that exposes the ‘act’ in witchcraft; “the etymological force of the word [maleficium], its root in the verb facio, to make, construct, fashion, frame, build, erect, produce, compose.” Speech was the primary means of expressing anger and enacting ill will; likewise, muttering and grumbling followed by misfortune was seen as evidence of witchcraft or a curse. In the Scottish witch trials, “charming” – the uttering of spells – and “sorcerie” – the use of certain words, incantations or the manipulation of objects – were both frequent add-ons to accusations of witchcraft. Under the principles of this belief system, the practice of witchcraft in Scotland was believed always to be accompanied by some indication, usually verbal, of the casting of such evil power, from articulate cursing to barely audible muttering in order to “establish that the mobilization of powerful ill will has been attempted.” For example, after Janet McMuldroch’s horse wandered into John Harris’s grain, he refused to return the animal to her until she had made compensation for the damage, “whereupon she went away discontent and murmuring.” His child drowned the next day, and Janet had been “under ane avill report,” from that day. Murmuring and grumbling was therefore considered just as suspect as overt cursing, while at other times more explicit spell casting was required. In 1643, Janet Brown was charged for charming two people by uttering the following spell:
Our Lord forth raide,
His foal’s foot slade:
Our Lord down lighted,
His foal’s foot righted;
Saying: Flesh to flesh, blood to blood,
and bane to bane,
In Our Lord his name.\(^\text{24}\)

Likewise, Bessie Graham was also accused of charming, and confessed to saying: “God teach me to pray to put the ill away, out of the flesh blood and bane into the earth and calld staine and nevir to again in Gods name.”\(^\text{25}\) In uttering spells and words like these, witches violated their gender norms by breaking their silence and capitalizing on the power of words.

The words of witches had many powers, but one in particular demonstrates the threat that the witch posed to patriarchy through its clear connotations of emasculation. The *Malleus Maleficarum* discusses at length how witches could “Deprive Man of his Virile Member.”\(^\text{26}\) It was a common belief in Scotland as well as Europe that witches had the power to cause impotence, or conversely, give a man a permanent erection. For example, Edward J. Cowan points out that, in the case of a curse laid by Helen Gray, the victim’s “wand lay nevir doune” until he died.\(^\text{27}\) In 1590, Jonett Grant was accused of, among other things, “gewing of ane secret memeber to Johnne Coutis; and gewing and taking of power fra sundrie mennis memberis,” including the taking of Johnne Wattis secret member from him.\(^\text{28}\) In another example, John Williamsone declared that Alisone Paterson\text{e}s lain beside his wife the night before they were married, and that when he went to lay next to his wife in the bed she had lain with Alisone the night before he “was not able to Performe the Dewtie of the marriage bed to his wyffe for the space of twentie dayes and ever since Remaines Debilitat In his body.”\(^\text{29}\) A witch and her words were thus represented as
having the power to either imbue or destroy a man’s potency, the ultimate threat to masculinity. The only solution to this pernicious threat was to control the speech of witches through their trial and execution.

Another linking feature between words and witches is the equation of witches with scolds. As early as the sixteenth century, Reginald Scot wrote that “[t]he chief fault of witches is that they are scolds.” While Scot was attempting to defend English women from prosecution as witches – a practice he saw as superstitious and barbaric – he was also making a valid observation of how witches were portrayed in popular belief. In both Scotland and England, many ‘rank witches’ were also identified as ‘common scolds’ in the accusations of their trials. In England, the term ‘common scold’ referred to its technical usage in common law; a scold was “an individual liable to prosecution and punishment for nuisance for continually disturbing the neighbours by contentious behaviour.” Scolding was a prosecutable offence in Scotland as well, and was a crime associated most frequently with women. In 1585 in Edinburgh, the accusation of “Kaite the witche” also identified her as a “common skold.” Interestingly, the records also indicate that she was hired by the Earl of Arran to harass certain ministers of the city, which suggests that women’s words had well-known power in the social sphere.

Christina Larner states that “[i]t was only when the supply of notorious scolds had been exhausted – for cursing and quarrelling were the hallmarks of prime suspects – that ‘honest’ [those of blameless reputation] women were in danger in Scotland.” Many women could therefore be (and were) accused of scolding behaviour, regardless of their local notoriety. Kethren Portour was a blind woman who confessed to having met the devil in the company of two other women. In her confession, she repeatedly emphasized her desire to leave her companions and their associate but was unable to
walk away due to her disability. While Kethren laid the blame on her female companions, she also confessed herself to having been “a great banner and a terrible curser, and a very wicked woman” in her life. Likewise, Helen Guthrie confessed “that shoe has been a verie drunkensome woman, a terrible banner and curser and of a very wicked life and conversatione.” Helen also confessed herself to be a witch, and that “when shoe gave her malisone [curse] to any persone or creature it usually lighted.” Male witches could occasionally be accused of irritability and quarrelsomeness as well, such as in the case of Thomas Patouns in 1650, who “went home in ane Rage,” and cast a spell on Agnes McGowne when he caught her laughing at him. Such cases of scolding male witches were infrequent, yet the fact that most people, male and female, could be accused of having engaged in such behaviour at some point in their lives made the label of witch-hood almost universally applicable.

One of the strategies used to control women’s tongues was in a particular judicial practice that directly equated witchcraft with scolding. The branks, or ‘scold’s bridle’ was used in the legal prosecution of scolds and cases of slander in Scotland for over a century and a half, beginning somewhere around 1560. Used in courts as a punishment almost exclusively against women, this contraption carried a symbolic significance as a ‘bridle for women’s tongues.’ As John Harrison points out, “most women who were ‘branked’ had a reputation for argumentativeness … Many … had, at some time, been described as common sclanderers [sic], scolders, flyters or blasphemers.” However, Harrison also shows how this practice demonstrated the logical connection made between the deviant speech of scolds and that of witches by showing how branking was used to punish acts of cursing and ill-wishing: “At the heart of almost every case were specific, angry words, accusations, insults and ill-wishing … most cases were associated with the more serious
types of insults, involving accusation, threat, curses, ill wishing or contempt." Indeed, the branks was also used as a punishment in witchcraft cases, where it was known as the “witch’s bridle,” and its use directly correlates with periods of witchcraft prosecution. A nineteenth-century scholar provides a gruesome description of its presumed use in witchcraft cases:

‘Witches bridles’ … were so constructed, that by means of a hoop which passed over the head, a piece of iron, having four points or prongs, was forcibly thrust into the mouth, two of these being directed to the tongue and the palate, the others pointing outwards to each cheek. This infernal machine was secured by a padlock. At the back of the collar was fixed a ring, by which to attach the Witch to a staple in the wall of her cell. Thus equipped, and night and day, ‘waked’ and watched by some skilful person appointed by her inquisitors, the unhappy creature, after a few days of such discipline, maddened by the misery of her forlorn and helpless state, would be rendered fit for ‘confessing’ any thing, or order to be rid of the dregs of her wretched life.

As a bridle for the tongues of both the scold and the witch, judicial use of the branks demonstrates how speech was the linking factor between these two stereotypes of female deviancy. In both cases, the message was clear: women’s words needed to be controlled.

When looking at this evidence drawn from the depositions and accusations of the witch trials, it becomes apparent that speech was clearly the most distinguishing characteristic of the witch. Likely to be quarrelsome, she was identifiable through her reputation as both a scold and a caster of spells. The curses and charms of these individuals indicate that it was through words that the witch activated her ill will
and directed it toward her victim. Yet when we turn to the ‘confessions’ of alleged witches, it is not the witch’s deviant speech that is so readily apparent, but her unnatural and demonic sexuality.

In contrast to the depositional evidence, the ‘confessions’ of accused witches include repeated reference to the diabolical nature of the witch, and a subsequent concern regarding her sexual relationship with the Devil. As Brian Levack points out, “initial suspicions and accusations at the village level did not usually involve the charge of making a pact with the Devil and having sexual relations with him. Almost invariably these charges were added at a later stage of the judicial process, often at the instigation of an interrogator.” As products of interrogation, confessions can be seen to reflect the concerns of elite authority.

The confession was the site at which the state claimed the authority to designate and identify the deviance of witches, thereby imposing its own moral code and conformity on the populace. These confessions were often wrung out of women through torture or under threat of bodily harm. Although torture in Scotland was ostensibly discouraged, authorities often saw fit to look the other way. In 1629, one son filed a complaint that his mother’s accusers had:

putt violent hands in her persoun, band her arms with towes, and so threw the same about that they disjointed and mutilat both her armes, and made the sinews to loupe asunder, and thairafter with thair haill force drew ane great tow about her waust, kuist her on her backe, and with thair knees they birsed, bruised, and pursed her so that she wes not able to stirre, strake the heid of ane speir throw her left foote, to the effusioun of her blood in great quantitie and perrell of her lyffe…
Under such conditions, it is perhaps understandable why many individuals would have confessed to the crime of witchcraft and numerous other diabolical deeds in order to forego any further punishment.

Even in cases where physical torture was not specifically used, fear and psychological pressure could easily have the same effects in eliciting a confession from the accused. Sleep deprivation was one such commonly used method in bringing alleged witches to confess. While some authors have refused to categorize sleep deprivation as explicit torture, the practice of ‘waking the witch’ incorporated many inhumane and torturous aspects and was frequently used in the same way as – or in conjunction with – actual physical torture. Those accused of witchcraft were kept in a cell and constantly harassed until, after days of no rest, the alleged witches would begin to hallucinate, leading to their ‘confession.’ For example, in a case described by Stuart MacDonald, Maggie from St. Morgan’s was watched and waked using a horn and goad, and kept awake for days in a successful attempt to elicit a confession. Numerous itemizations of costs recorded in the trials of witches also demonstrate the importance of keeping witches awake in order to gain a confession. Some of the expenses recorded in an account from a burgh’s treasurer in 1649-50 included: candles used by the overnight watchers charged with keeping the witches awake, ale for them to drink during their vigil, and the buying and fetching of hair cloth to be worn by the witches as an aid to keep them from sleeping.

Under such pressure, the confessions of many alleged witches may very well have been influenced by leading questions asked by the victim’s inquisitors, to which the alleged witch might have readily agreed for fear of further torture. The questions asked in the interrogation of witches were rarely recorded; yet in order to secure a conviction, these examiners were required to demonstrate that the individual’s
activities conformed to certain agreed-upon tenants of witchcraft and witch behaviour. The surprising amount of conformity of witchcraft confessions across both time and space in Scotland supports this hypothesis. It also demonstrates that a certain ‘model’ of witchcraft was known and sought by the educated judicial representatives of the witchcraft trials. This model, reflected in the confessions of witches, indicates the presence of an elite witch-belief system which emphasized the witch’s sexual and diabolical nature.

Scottish elite witch belief drew heavily on imagery from the continent in which the witch was characterized first and foremost by her extreme carnality. The *Malleus Maleficarum* states that “all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable … There are three things that are never satisfied, yea a fourth thing which says not, It is enough; that is, the mouth of the womb. Wherefore for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils.”

James VI echoes the *Malleus’* preconceptions of the sexuality of witches in his treatise, *Daemonology*, declaring them to be ‘altogether given over to the pleasures of the flesh.’ The excessive sexuality of women was therefore considered a primary cause of their susceptibility to witchcraft and the Devil. Women, as hypersexual beings, were believed to be more likely to give in to the temptations of the flesh offered by the Devil and his demonic minions.

Many witches’ confessions prominently featured their sexual activities, usually with the Devil himself. At Borrowstounness in 1624, Katherine Blair, Jonne Dunbar, and Isabell Cootis all confessed to “having conversed with the devil ‘after a fleshe manner,’” while at the witches’ meeting in Aberdeen in 1597, the Devil had sex with all present in the likeness of a beast. In 1621, Margaret Chatto and several associates had “confessit their divilische practizes and the geving over of thame selffis saull and body to the divill,” while Margaret herself was identified as being the “most
familiar with him.” In the proceedings against Agnes Murrie, it was recorded that “likeways at the same time Sathan had the use of your body at the foot of the round knowe at the back of the yards of Tullibole, and [you] knew not whether his body was hot or cold, whilk ye did also freely confess.” The reward for the witches at North Berwick “was to be carnally used by the Devil, ‘albeit to their little pleasure, in respect of his colde nature’.” The Devil’s ‘nature’ – an understood euphemism for his penis – was often referred to as cold as ice or ‘spring-well water,’ as in the confessions of Isobel Goudie and Janet Braidheid in 1662. Isabelle Rutherford also confessed to having carnal copulation with the Devil, and reported that “his body was cald and his seed likewise.” The belief that the devil’s body and seed were cold derived from the idea that the devil had no physical form, but that he could compose one out of compressed air if he needed to. This body was considered to be solid, but had no blood, and therefore – in accordance with contemporary medical theory of bodily humours – no heat. Female witches had the means by which to be well acquainted with this physiological aspect of the Devil, as sexual intercourse appears to be “an almost essential ingredient in female accounts of the [Demonic] Pact.”

In contrast, hardly any male witches appear to have been accused of having sexual relations with the Devil. Male witches were often accused of meeting the Devil, attending witches’ meetings, and participating in the Pact, but their relationship with the Devil appears to have more frequently been one of economic rather than sexual exchange. For example, Robert Wilson confessed to engaging in the Pact and renouncing his baptism, for which “Sathan promised you both silver and gold, whilk ye said ye never got.” As discussed earlier, depositions against male witches sometimes included evidence of scolding, yet the majority of cases do not seem to rely so heavily on this stereotype as in the trials
of women. This evidence shows that while anyone, male or female, could be accused of witchcraft, it was the female witch stereotype that was specifically associated with speech and sexuality.

A reputation for sexual promiscuity could also result in an accusation for witchcraft at a later date, further signifying the connection made between female witches and sexuality. In reviewing the great witch hunt of 1660-62, Levack states that:

A number of women accused of witchcraft had previously been suspected of, or even prosecuted for, various forms of moral deviance. Helen Cass, for example, was widely known to be sexually promiscuous, especially with English soldiers, as early as 1655, while Christian Wilson had been delated for cursing on the Sabbath in 1658, and Helen Cocker had committed fornication with John Wysurd before being committed to the tollbooth for witchcraft in 1661. In another example, Elspet Bruce was accused of being present at witches’ meetings by three other women who had previously been convicted on charges of witchcraft. Elspet denied being guilty of witchcraft, however, she agreed that “if it so be that it wer proven against her that she had committed adulterie she would acknowledge herself a witche.” It was proven later in the proceedings that Elspet had indeed committed adultery, and although the conclusion of this trial is not recorded, we can assume that she was most likely held to her earlier promise and made to confess as a witch.

Copulation with the Devil was a standard feature in Scottish accounts of the Demonic Pact, which was derived from continental understandings of diabolism in witchcraft. Diabolism refers to the concept that the witch draws her power not from herself or the natural world, as in traditional
folk-belief, but from the Devil. In order to receive their powers from their new master, witches would often be required to participate in a ceremony that formalized their union with the Devil. In the Demonic Pact, the witch renounced his or her Christian baptism and then was re-baptized, with a new name given to them by the Devil. The typical ceremony would consist of the witch placing one hand upon her head and the other on the sole of her foot, declaring everything in between the two hands the property of the Devil. Several witches in Crook, Kinross-shire, for example, confessed to having “engaged themselves to be [the Devil’s] servant by putting one of their hands on the crown of their head and the other under the sole of their foot, and delivering all betwixt them over to him.” In one case in 1626, described by Stuart MacDonald, Jonet Dempster confessed to the “renunceing of hir baptisme, ressaveing of the devill’s mark and giving of hir soule and bodie over to the devillis service.” In return for her immortal soul the witch would receive “various earthly advantages,” which in Scotland and England were often nothing more than that “she should be free from want; she should have pleasure.” For example, Bessie Henderson was recorded to have confessed that she had promised to be the devil’s servant, in exchange for which “she should want nothing.”

Following the ceremony, the Pact would then be typically consummated by receiving the Devil’s Mark, usually through a nip or bite from the Devil, followed – if the witch was female – by one or more acts of sexual intercourse. After promising her service to the devil, Bessie Henderson also confessed to renouncing her baptism and receiving a new name from the Devil the night he copulated with her: “and the name [the Devil] gave you was Bessie Iswall, and the time he gave it to you was in the night in your bed, being bodie like to ane man, and this his body was cald and his seed likewise.” Joanet Huit confessed to meeting the
devil with several other witches, and dancing and drinking and making merry with them. At her second meeting, she confessed, “that at this mieting the divill kyst hir and nipped her upon one of hir shoulders, so as shoe hade great paine for some tyme thereafter.” At her third meeting with him, “then the divill calling hir his bony bird did kisse her, and straiked hir shoulder which was nipped with his hand, and that presently after that shoe was eased of hir former paine.” Like Joanet, many other witches ‘confessed’ to not only having received the Devil’s mark, but also to having sexual relations with him, as in 1659 when “great numberis of witches wer takin and brint, all of thame confessing copulatioun, renunciation of their baptisme, and taking fra Satan new names and markis in their flesche.” The Devil’s mark subsequently came to symbolize both the witch’s diabolical power and her explicitly sexual relationship with the Devil.

Goodare argues that, even when not present in the confession, sex with the Devil was understood to be a standard part of the Demonic Pact for women. In addition, in order for women to be considered witches, they must necessarily have engaged in the Demonic Pact in order to receive their diabolical power: “the interrogators could infer the pact’s existence from the fact of witchcraft, and they could infer sex from the pact,” therefore, the “crime of witchcraft, for many women, was broadly equivalent to the crime of fornication with the Devil.” Consequently, the association between sexual reputation and a reputation for witchcraft, the frequent confessional feature of copulation with the devil, and the sexual nature of the Devil’s Pact itself, can all be taken as evidence of a heavy preoccupation with the deviant sexuality of the female witch.

The fact that these sexual stereotypes were almost always associated with the ‘confessions’ of witches, and were hardly ever present in the depositional evidence against
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alleged witches, has been taken to indicate the presence of an elite witch belief system that was distinct from peasant belief; as Goodare points out, “it seems clear that sex entered into most confessions because interrogators wanted it there … When it came to witches, it was the authorities who feared a sexual conspiracy.” Goodare argues that elite authorities were directly concerned with limiting female sexual behaviour, which led to the association between sexuality and witchcraft, in order to maintain moral conformity in the population. While this might indeed begin to explain why the government sought to encourage and participate in witchcraft prosecution, it fails to address fully why local communities were such avid participants in the witch hunt, or how stereotypes of scolding witches and deviant speech practices played a role in constructing the witch in Scottish belief.

From the evidence reviewed so far, it is clear that both female speech and sexuality played a strong role in constructing the witch in early modern Scottish witch belief. However, most authors maintain that the scolding witch was a product of popular belief, including fairy belief and local folklore, while the elite model of witchcraft was much more concerned with a diabolical conspiracy of copulating witches. When we look at the primary documents, the evidence does indeed seem to support this differentiation. Depositions focus on alleged witch’s words, while confessions appear more concerned with her relationship (usually sexual) with the Devil. Yet, in early modern ideology, female speech and sexuality were not clearly separated from each other; women’s words hinted at their transgressive carnality, while a promiscuous nature was manifestly linked to a profusion of speech. This relationship has been noted by several scholars of early modern gender, and the associations of both characteristics with femininity have a long tradition in medieval and Classical texts. In popular literature and ballads, for example, prostitutes and other sexually ‘loose’ women
were also associated with ‘looseness’ of the tongue, while notorious scolds were known to be sexually licentious and adulteresses. An early modern woman’s sexual chastity was labelled as her ‘honesty,’ while sexually promiscuous women were termed ‘dishonest.’ The natural link between women’s sexual and verbal nature was grounded in the embodiment of women in medical discourse, drawing its authority from the writings of ancients like Galen and Aristotle who believed in a close metaphoric and functional relationship between a woman’s upper and lower ‘mouths,’ both of which were guarded by lips “best kept closed.” Likewise, in religious discourse, “cackling” Eve represented both the dangers of imprudent conversation and sexual temptation, while frequently juxtaposed with her positive opposite, the Virgin Mary, who was reputed as having spoken only four times in Scripture. In crime, women were most frequently punished for verbal and sexual crimes – and sometimes both – and the punishments for these two classes of crime were frequently interchangeable; consequently, control of both aspects of femininity was crucial to the investment of patriarchy. Lynda Boose addresses this relationship in crime and popular culture, arguing that:

As illogical as it may initially seem, the two crimes, being a scold and being a so-called whore – were frequently conflated...the talkative woman is frequently imagined as synonymous with the sexually available woman, her open mouth the signifier for invited entrance elsewhere. Hence, the dictum that associates “silent” with “chaste” and stigmatizes women’s public speech as behaviour fraught with cultural signs resonating with a distinctly sexual kind of shame... Given these connections between body and state, control of women’s speech becomes a massively important project.
The various manifestations of the links made between female speech and sexuality in the early modern period are too numerous to be treated fully here. Suffice it to say, the relationship between women’s words and their sexual behaviour was well-known at all levels of society at this time. So if a woman’s sexuality could be used to invoke her speech, as well as in reverse, what are the implications of this correlative relationship in the witch trials? And how does this association influence our conclusions about a separation in belief systems?

In looking again at the sources, we begin to see that these two stereotypes of the witch – the speaking witch and the sexual witch – were also not quite so fully distinct from one another; one form was often used to invoke the other. Speaking and scolding women were accused of witchcraft at the local level, but in the process of the prosecution these same women were also forced to confess to a number of sexually deviant practices with the Devil. As discussed earlier, Goodare has argued that the nature of the witchcraft, predicated on the presence of the Pact, meant that copulation with the Devil could be assumed to have taken place for all female witches, even when not stated explicitly. I would argue that, furthermore, the witch’s powerful speech could be identified as the initial signifier of the witch’s internal state of deviancy and desire, automatically presuming and invoking the presence of the Devil and therefore an unnatural sexual relationship with him. Conversely, the belief that witches participated in the Pact and copulated with the Devil functioned to demonize the words of alleged witches, implying that uncontrolled speech was dangerous, deviant, and a threat to the community.

This, then, is the understood relationship of speech and sexuality in the witch. While local communities were interested in exposing and accusing witches of spell-casting and scolding, they did so knowing full well that by invoking
the deviant speech practices of the alleged witch, the natural – and sexual – relationship of the witch with the devil could be assumed. Without sex with the devil, the witch’s speech could have no power. On the other hand, potent words exposed the hidden and demonic sexuality of the witch. Depositional evidence against Janet Paton included situations where individuals who had turned her away had suffered illness, injury, or other bad luck, so it was no surprise when she confessed to having attended Satan’s meeting, renouncing her baptism, agreeing to be the Devil’s servant, and having copulated with him. Indeed, she could hardly have been a witch if she had not done those things. Likewise, Agnes Murrie confessed “at the same time Sathan had the use of your body at the foot of the round knowe at the back of the yards of Tullibole, and you knew not whether his body was hot or cold … and likeways ye confesst that the first time the devil had to do with you he gave the mark in your craig [neck].” Expert testimony of several witnesses against Agnes includes multiple instances of her cursing and talking back to men in authority which then resulted in their sickness, or even, in one case, loss of speech. Here especially can the dual manifestation of the witch’s speech and sexuality be seen in both her relationship with the Devil – characterized by copulation and receiving the Devil’s Mark in her throat – and in the effects of her evil voice. Similarly, Isabel Rutherford confessed to having carnal dealings with the Devil, renouncing her baptism, and receiving the Devil’s Mark. When Isabel’s charms and healing failed to work on James Wilson, he sent her away, after which he was reported to have refused his wife, and thereafter “never stirred from his bed unlifted,” a diagnosis that might allude to debilitating illness, or possibly to a subsequent impotency caused by Isobel’s words and her sexual relationship with the Devil. In these cases, the speech and sexuality of men were seen as
vulnerable to the emasculating and polluting influences of the witch’s demonic words.

In *Newes From Scotland*, a popular pamphlet describing the infamous North Berwick trials of 1590-91, Geillis Duncan was said to have been tortured until the Devil’s Mark was found in her neck:

whereupon, they suspecting that she had beene marked by the Devill (as commonly witches are), made diligent search about her, and found the enemies marke to be in her fore crag, or fore part of her throate; which being found, shee confessed that al her doings was done by the wicked allurements and entisements of the Devil, and that she did them by witchcraft.\(^85\)

Upon her discovery, Geillis Duncan also confessed the names of numerous other witches, including Agnes Sampson, “the eldest witche of them all.” Agnes was also tortured, according to the pamphlet, “until the Divels marke was founde upon her privities.”\(^86\) Surprisingly, the judicial records from Agnes’s trial report that her mark was found on her right knee. The popular rather than legal context of *Newes from Scotland* suggests that the witches’ deviancy was already strongly associated with both their speech and sexuality in popular imagination, as the locations of the marks of Geillis (throat) and Agnes (privities) clearly indicate.

While a sexual relationship with the Devil was seen as the source of their power, witches continued to be identified and associated specifically with their words. For the aforementioned Agnes Sampson – one of the leading figures in the North Berwick trials – it was, in the end, her speech which gave her away. In over thirty accusations against her, almost all revolve around her words. She was accused of healing people through her, “incantatioune and prayer,” as well as of multiple instances of prophetic speaking, such as in prediction of a patient’s living or dying.\(^87\) In another example,
Agnes Johnstoun testified that she went to Bessie Grahme when her child was ill. After muttering some “speiches” Bessie reportedly told Agnes: “the child was seik and wald not Leive and it provit so and the child died presentlie.”88 In speaking their belief, these women were held accountable when their words came to pass, an ability that was believed to only have come from God or the Devil. Since it was known that God did not speak to lowly women such as these, their powers must have come from his nemesis. In addition, as sorcerers, charmers, and spell-casters, witches were strongly associated with powerful and unlawful words; yet, as scolds, *banners*, and cursers of great repute, witches were also identified by their illicit speech practices. The unruly speech of these women was used as evidence of their diabolical relationship with the Devil, thereby exposing their insatiable lust. In this way, the curses and quarrels of alleged witches were used to signify their hidden and internal sexuality.

As has been discussed, most scholarship on the Scottish witch trials maintains a distinction between popular belief – reflecting a concern with the speaking or scolding witch – and an elite system which instead prioritized the witch’s sexual nature. However, we have also seen how closely intertwined these two concepts were in the witch trials, as well as in contemporary gender ideology. In emphasizing a witch’s sexual deviancy, elite authorities were invoking and acting upon a commonly understood and gendered association with her unnatural speech. In persecuting witches at a local level and encouraging accusations of illicit words, local magistrates and ministers drew on a common belief that witches copulated with the Devil. Therefore, both parties were by necessity complicit in relying on and reinforcing a common relationship between female speech and sexuality in contemporary ideology. This approach, grounded in the exploration of gender and belief, consequently challenges the prevailing paradigm; by
collapsing the distinction between female speech and sexuality, the apparent separation between popular and elite witch belief also dissolves. In recognizing these critical relationships, we can move beyond questions of why witches were women – due to their clear association with specifically *speech* as well as sexuality – and address why witches, both women *and* men, were hunted.

Many authors have focused on the sexual representations of the witch, arguing that the emphasis on witches’ carnal natures reveals a misogynistic desire to control women’s bodies. Certainly the close association of female sexuality with the demonic in the witch trials would have had a dramatically negative impact on conceptions of gender in the early modern period. Yet, when we look at the individuals who were accused of witchcraft, it becomes clear that alleged witches were not arrested for their sexual conduct, demonic or not; instead, it was their speech that revealed their true nature to their neighbours: their words that carried the threat of their unauthorized agency and malicious will. Witches were identified in their communities as scolds and cursers, as well as casters of verbal spells, and it was plain to everyone involved that their words needed to be controlled. As we have just discussed, elites and local authorities worked in complicity to actively invoke and promote an image of the witch that emphasized her diabolical sexuality in order to demonize her speech. The very real fear with which the populace viewed the witch is apparent in the particular enthusiasm demonstrated by local communities in hunting witches. The witch had become the physical manifestation of the profane, threatening the natural order and the bodies and lives of her neighbours. Yet it was always the witches’ words that needed to be controlled and were sought out as indicators of the witches’ status.

Words were power in the early modern period, and not just for witches. As part of a primarily oral culture, a person’s
honour was often linked to the reliability of their words. In addition, authority and power of all sorts were often characterized by ritual performances of speech; as Larner notes, “Social control in seventeenth-century Scotland was demonstrated continuously by competitive performative utterances.”

Formal acts of law, marriage ceremonies, rituals of prayer, preaching, and public discipline all rested on the power of ritualized and performative speech. Even the witch trial itself revolved around the ritual reading of the accusation, confession, and the pronouncement of guilt and sentence of the witch by the judicial authorities. Consequently, in prosecuting and demonizing the powerful words of witches, elites ensured that the words and authority of the state were seen as the most powerful of any on earth. As part of this centralized and hierarchically arranged system of authority, local officials and ministers also benefitted from the silencing of others, claiming the right to speak on behalf of the state as well as God in persecuting and prosecuting those accused of witchcraft. The structure of the state ensured that both local elite and aristocratic elite would work together – not separately – and profit from silencing the voices of the disempowered.

In claiming control over the power of speech, these authorities targeted specifically those who were already associated with words; women and witches. The established relationship between women, words, and sexuality facilitated the demonization of these individuals by linking the unruly speech of alleged witches to their unnatural lust and desire. It also bestowed upon them an aberrant and profane source of power that allowed the state to juxtapose the demonic abilities of the witch with the greater and more glorious power of God and the Protestant state. In restricting the speech of those associated with deviant words, local and state authorities used their own performative utterances in witchcraft prosecution to ensure that their words were the only words that mattered.
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Notes


Dolan, Dangerous Familiars, 198.

Larner, Enemies, 9, 73, 139-143.

Larner, Enemies, 9.


Black, “Calendar of Cases,”182.


Pitcairn, Ancient Criminal Trials, v. 1, part 2, 206.


Martin Ingram, ‘‘Scolding women cucked or washed’: a crisis in gender relations in early modern England?” in Women, Crime and the
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33 Black, “Calendar of Cases,” 150.


42 While other images and sources can be used to substantiate Pitcairn’s description of the witch’s bridle, his account of the specific uses of the bridle remains speculative. However, this passage continues to be helpful in that it demonstrates the association between witchcraft and the punishment of the bridle. Pitcairn, *Ancient Criminal Trials*, v. 1, part 2, 50.

43 Levack, “The Great Scottish Witch Hunt,” 266.


45 Black, “Calendar of Cases,” 172.


51 James VI, *Daemonologie* (1597), in *Witchcraft in Early Modern Scotland: James VI Demonology and the North Berwick Witches*, eds.
52 Black, “Calendar of Cases,” 164; Cowan, “The Devil’s Decade,” 75.
53 Black, “Calendar of Cases,” 162.
55 Pitcairn, Ancient Criminal Trials, v. 1, part 2, 219; See also Cowan, “The Devil’s Decade,” 72.
56 Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context,” 39; For more examples on the ‘cold nature’ of the Devil, see Larner, Enemies, 149
57 Begg, “Notice of Trials for witchcraft,” 222.
59 Larner, Enemies, 148.
60 In my primary research I came across no references to specific cases of men having sexual relations with the Devil. Other scholars who have had access to more numerous sources have also stated that the relationship of male witches with the devil appears to not have been sexual. See Larner, Enemies, 149; Goodare, “Women and the Witch Hunt in Scotland,” 304.
64 Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context,” 27
65 Goodare, “Scottish Witchcraft in its European Context,” 34.
67 MacDonald, Witches of Fife, 77.
70 Larner, Enemies, 11.
71 The wording describing the body of the devil is almost identical to that recorded in the confession of Isabelle Rutherford who was prosecuted as a witch in the same trial as Bessie. This consistency is indicative of the preconceived notions regarding witchcraft of the judges who were involved in these prosecutions, yet very similar confessions are recorded from all over Scotland. See Begg, “Notice of Trials for witchcraft,” 219-225.
73 Begg, “Notice of Trials for witchcraft,” 216.
81 For a more in-depth treatment of this topic, see Sierra Dye, “Common Skolds and Carnal Witches: Stereotypes of Speech and Sexuality in Early-Modern Scotland” (MA thesis, Northern Arizona University, 2010), 65-89.
83 Begg, “Notice of Trials for witchcraft,” 219-220.
84 Begg, “Notice of Trials for witchcraft,” 223.